

IDEALS OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD

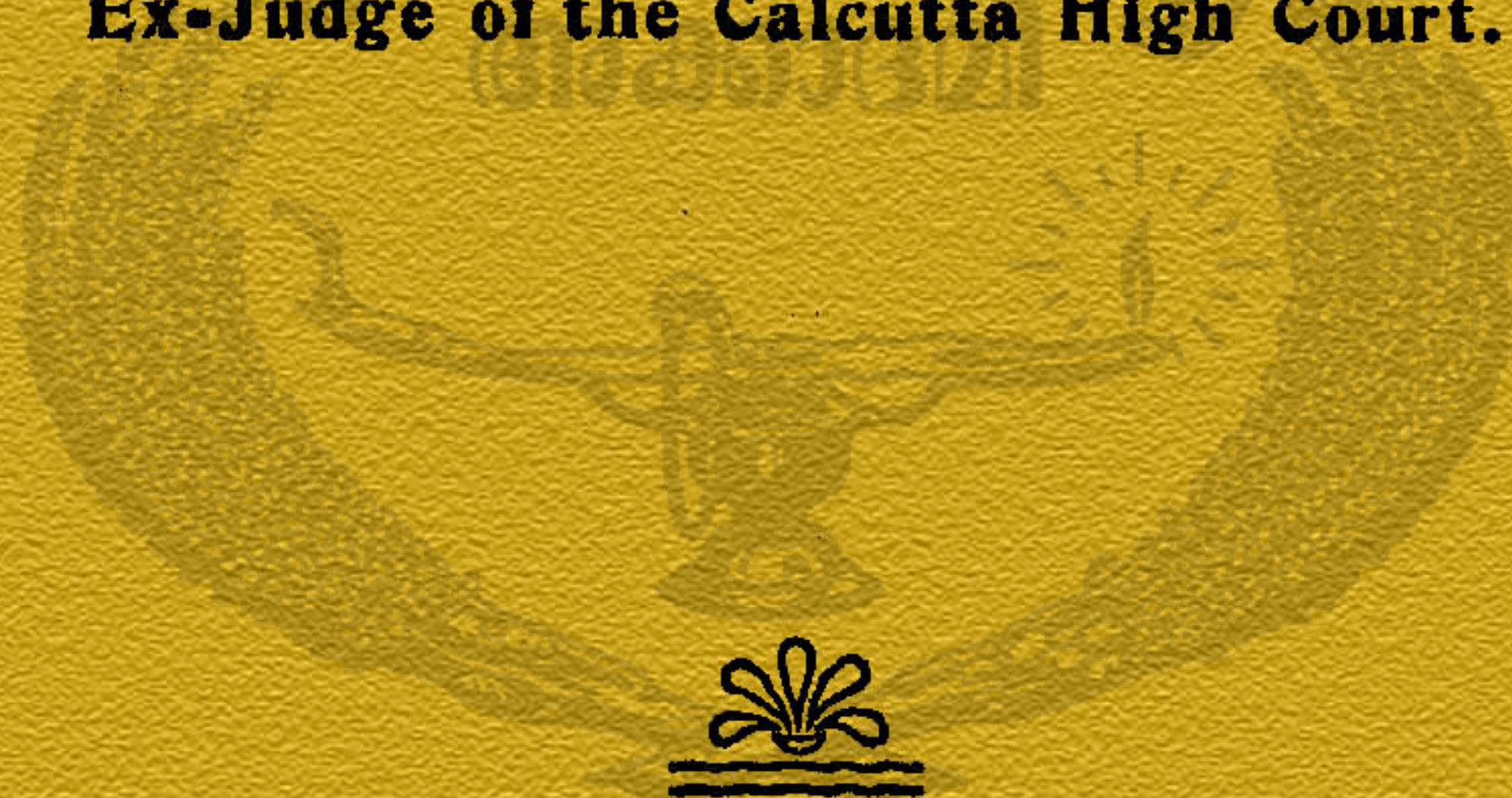
BY

PANCHANAN BHATTACHARYYA, B.A., B.T.

With a Foreword

BY

SIR A. CHAUDHURI, Kt., M.A., LL.B.,
Ex-Judge of the Calcutta High Court.



GOLDQUIN & CO.,
COLLEGE STREET MARKET,
CALCUTTA.

1921.

[All Rights Reserved.]

IDEALS OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD

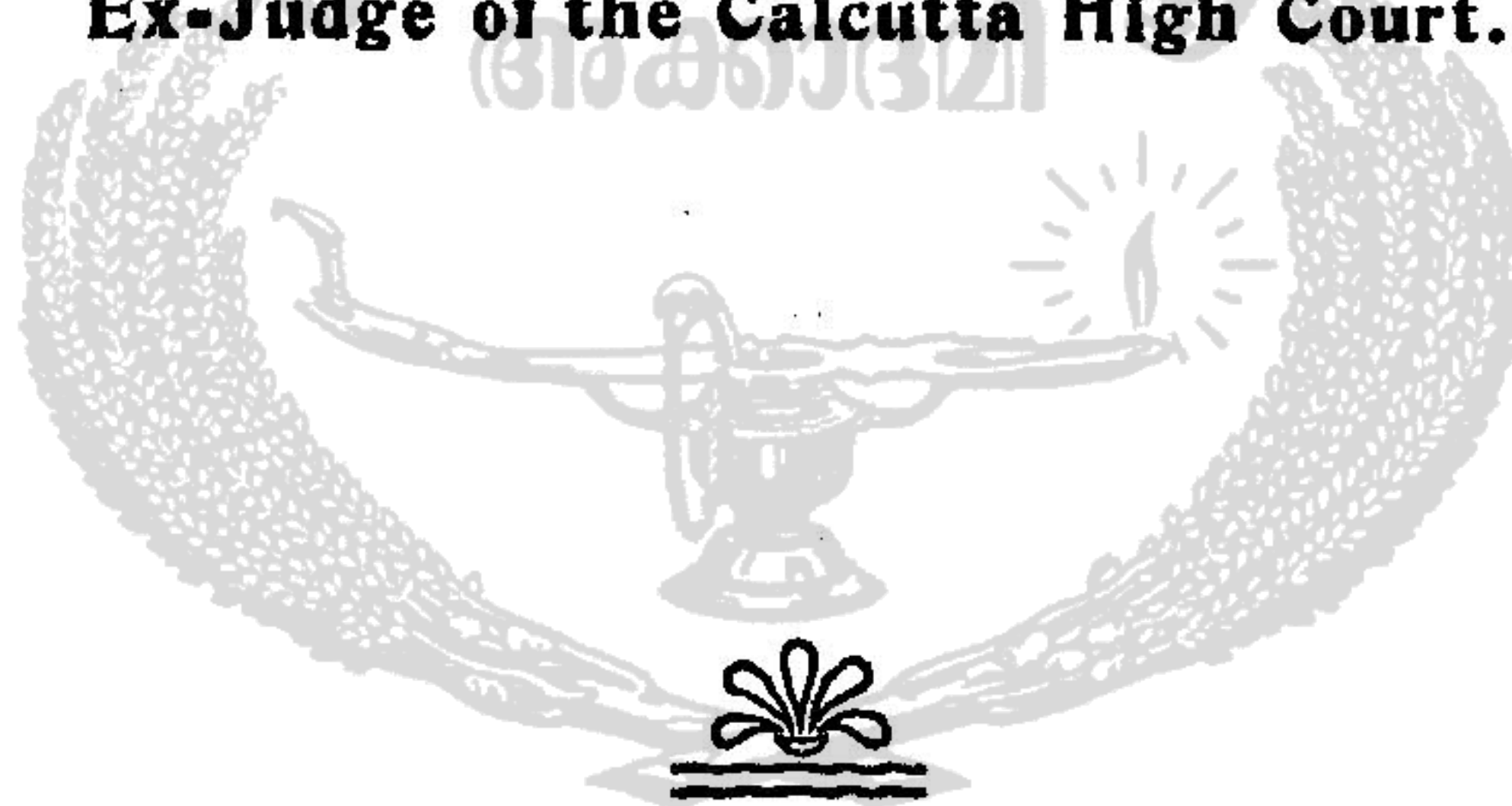
BY

PANCHANAN BHATTACHARYYA, B.A., B.T.

With a Foreword

BY

SIR A. CHAUDHURI, Kt., M.A., LL.B.,
Ex-Judge of the Calcutta High Court.



GOLDQUIN & CO.,
COLLEGE STREET MARKET,
CALCUTTA.

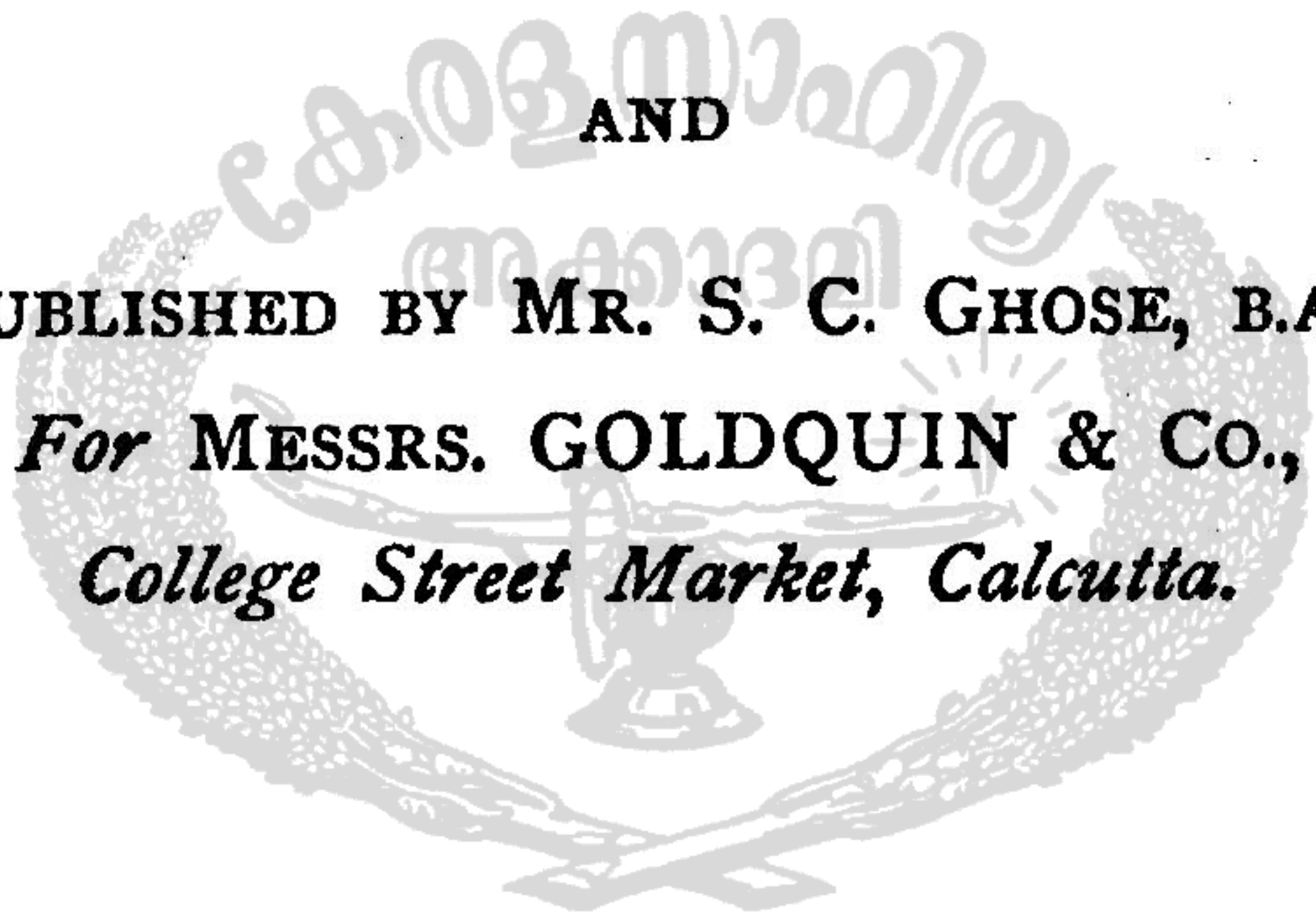
1921.

[All Rights Reserved.]

PRINTED BY K. C. NEOGI,
NABABIBHAKAR PRESS,
91/2, Machuabazar Street, Calcutta,

AND

PUBLISHED BY MR. S. C. GHOSE, B.A.,
For MESSRS. GOLDQUIN & CO.,
College Street Market, Calcutta.

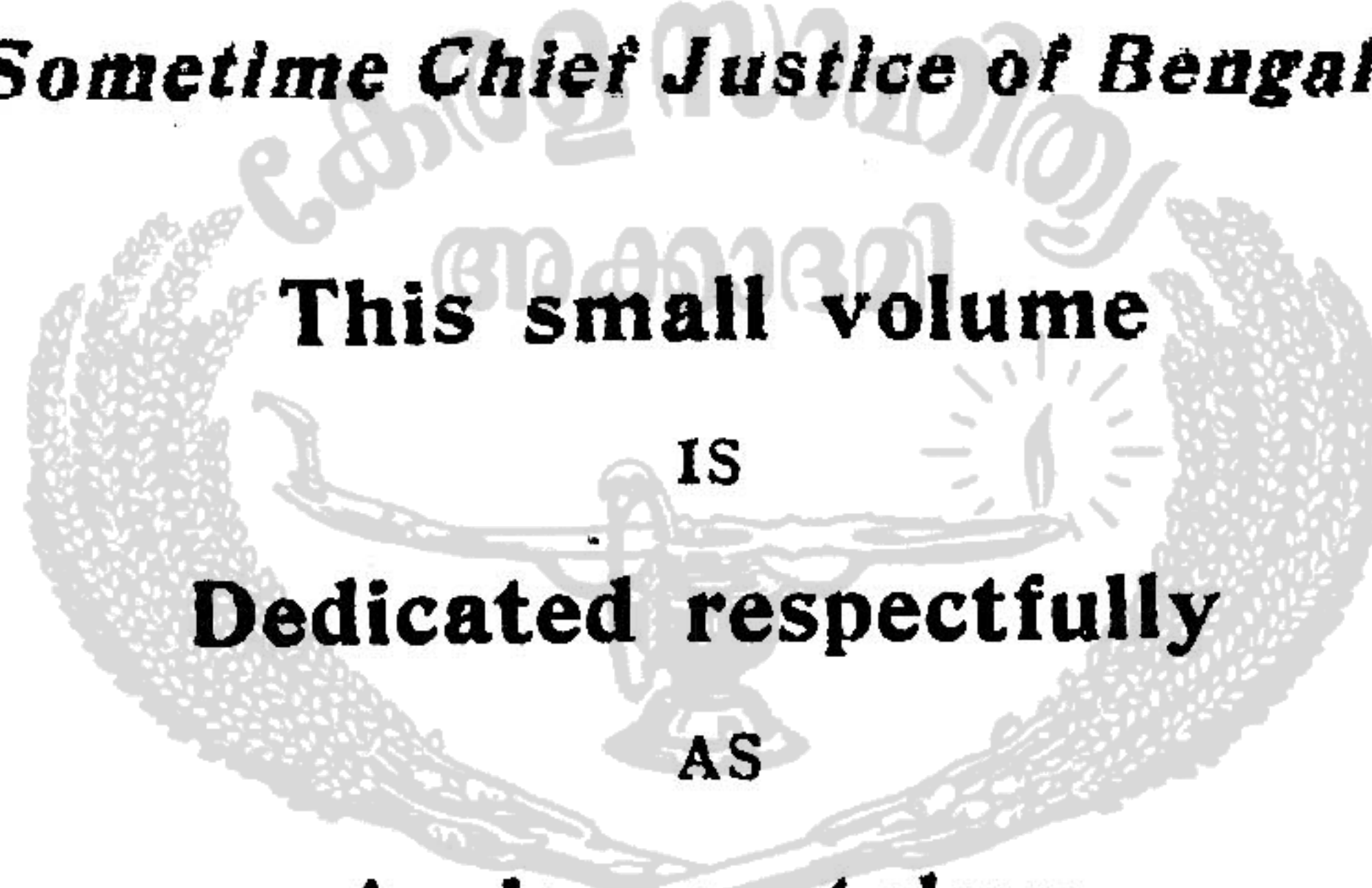


“Women have more heart and imagination than men. Enthusiasm arises from imagination, self-sacrifice springs from the heart. They are, therefore, by nature more heroic than heroes. And when this heroism becomes supernatural, it is from the woman that the wonder must be expected. Men would stop at valour.”

LAMARTINE.

TO
Lady Mukhopadhyaya,
WIFE OF
The Hon'ble Sir Asutosh Mukhopadhyaya, Kt.,
Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University

AND
Sometime Chief Justice of Bengal,



This small volume
IS
Dedicated respectfully
AS
A sincere token
OF
The Author's regard
FOR
The type of Indian womanhood
She so truly represents.

FOREWORD.

It has been said that women are the 'poetry of the world' in the same sense as the stars are the poetry of heaven. Clear, light-giving, harmonious, they are the terrestrial planets that rule the destinies of mankind. Poet Burns has also truly said "Women are the blood-royal of life: let there be slight degrees of precedence among them, but let them be all sacred." In India the woman has been treated as a goddess in the shrine of the family, although people who do not know our inner life have charged us with being unchivalrous to her. In India she is like the plant in the woods, and derives softness and tenderness from the shade. She has not been in the open air, but homage has been rendered to her by poets, philosophers and priests, and she has always been loved and honoured.

The writer of this work has historically treated the subject, and he has taken instances from the mythic and the historic cycles and also from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata. He has dealt with the ancient period, the medieval period and also the present period which he calls the period

of transition. He has dealt with Arundhati, Sati, and Shaibyā as instances of purity, self-consecration and constancy, and has given us the story of Seetā, Sāvitri and Gāndhārī as instances of self-abnegation, fidelity and righteousness. He has taken from the medieval period Durgā-vāti, Mirābāi and Ahalyā Bāi and others. The modern instances have also been very well chosen. He has produced a remarkable work which deserves to be widely read. It will serve to teach our women how great Indian women have been, and the place they can take in advancing a nation. The author deserves our thanks for having undertaken the task and accomplished it so well.

BALLYGUNJ,
2nd May, 1921.

A. CHAUDHURI.

THE WRITER'S NOTE.

In presenting the reading public with the life-stories of the following Indian ladies I cannot help touching briefly on the very painful circumstances that led to their compilation.

In June, 1918, my only daughter Ambālikā, a sweet little child of great beauty and promise, was cut off untimely by the cruel hand of Death, after a short illness of ten days, and the wretched parents were left to mourn the loss. When the first shock of the great grief was over, and I came slowly to realize that the best way of expressing love was rather to weep than to be wept for, I turned to the great epics of my country for whatsoever consolation these could bring. They did their work ; and though consolation was never meant to be compensation, the stories of Shāibyā, Seetā, Damayanti and Sāvitri revealed to me the chastening aspect of grief : I learnt the valuable lesson that grief is holy and has a moral to teach.

The idea then entered my mind that I should pay my humble tribute to the memory of the saintly women whose lives had exerted such a

steadying influence on my heart when it had almost reached the breaking point. Thus the stories of the earlier cycles came to be written ; the narration of the later cycles was only a natural unfolding of the theme originally conceived. It should be observed in this connexion that I have ended with the cycle of the Transition. My explanation is that the cycle of the New Light has yet to be judged.

In a compilation like this I can possibly lay no claim to any originality of conception. The vernacular literature extant in the country, and the traditions transmitted through generations afford sufficient materials to build with. But the presentation is my own.

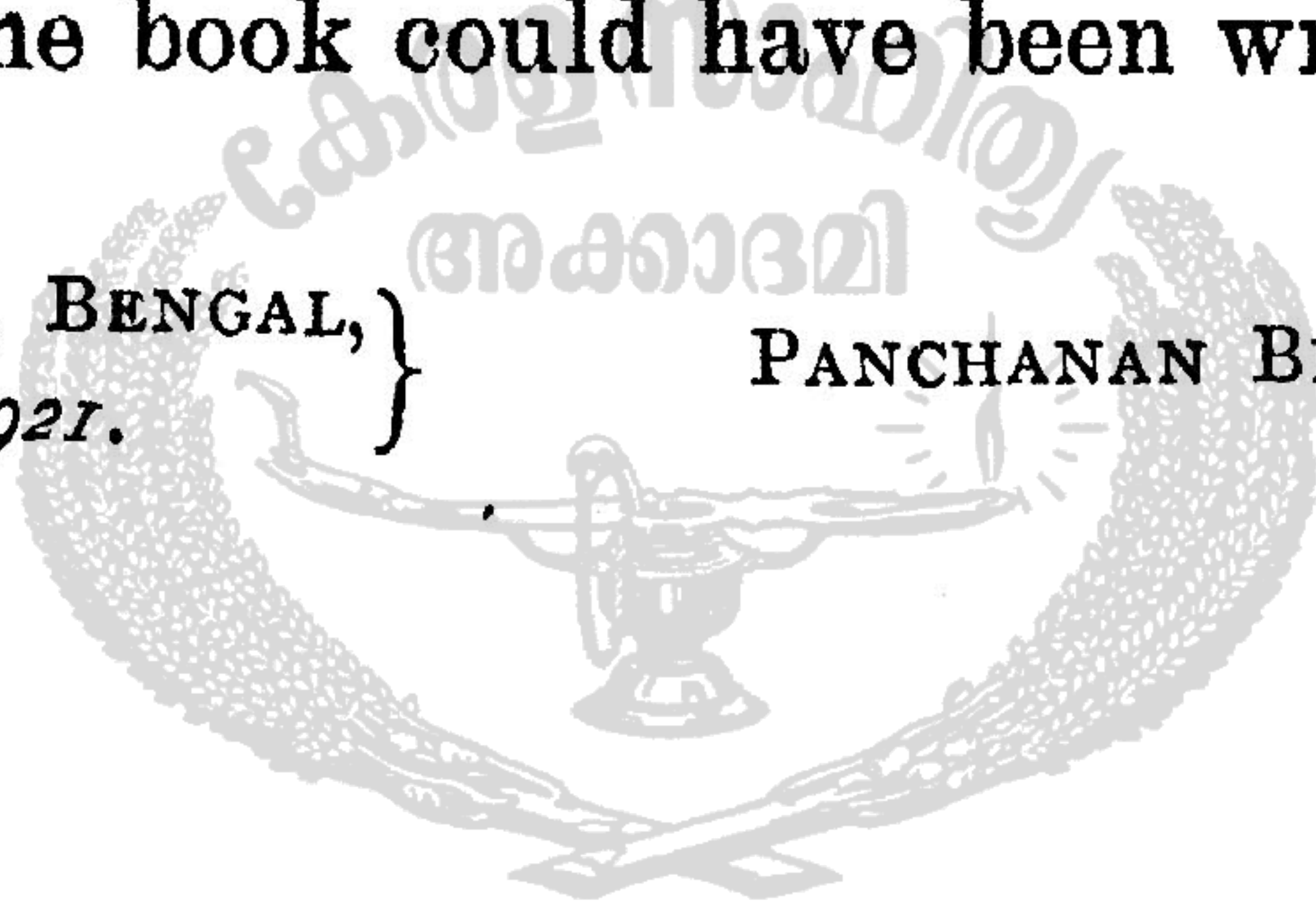
For the materials of some of these stories I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to many writers of distinction, chief among whom are the following names of my countrymen : Dr. Rabindra Nath Tagore ; Pandit T. K. Kavi-ratna ; Rai Shaheb Dinesh Chandra Sen ; Babus S. N. Roy ; R. K. Gupta ; K. P. Das Gupta ; A. L. Gupta ; J. N. Bose ; J. L. Khastagir ; and the Rev. P. C. Mazumdar ; and a number of European writers such as Elphinstone, Malcolm, Grant-Duff, Todd, Payne and Walsh.

Last, though not least, it is my pleasing duty

to offer my grateful thanks to that erudite European scholar, Dr.—who occupies the highest Chair of English Literature in one of the Indian Universities, but who prefers to remain nameless in this connexion, for the trouble he took in having kindly read the greater part of the book in manuscript with a view to improvement; and to Babus Benimadhava Das, M.A., B.E.S., and Raj Kumar Das, M.A., B.E.S., without whose encouragement and helpful suggestions I greatly doubt if the book could have been written at all.

KRISHNAGAR, BENGAL, }
June, 1921.

PANCHANAN BHATTACHARYYA.



PUBLISHERS' NOTE.

So much has been said or written, of recent years, concerning Indian women that the appearance of a fresh volume at this late hour of the day needs a word of apology. But so rich is Indian womanhood in its traditions of sacrifice, so ennobling the theme, and so varied the ideals that the tale can easily bear the frequency of repetition.

Alcestis and Laodamia have given eternal life to the mythic lore of ancient Europe; the peasant maid of Dôrmremy has immortalised the medieval history of France; Florence Nightingale stands out as the redeeming grace of the scandalous blunders of a civilized nineteenth-century war-cabinet; and the Western world has heard of their life-stories from day to day with sustained delight. Indian mythology and Indian history have, in a similar way, sent forth, from age to age, female martyrs or lady workers who have inspired the succeeding generations with their messages of Hope and Faith and Charity. They have shed a soft radiance on the pages of contemporary history. That the world does not

know of them what it should is not the fault of the glorious traditions they have created: it is the meagreness of narration, or the defective presentation that accounts for much of the lamentable ignorance professed by foreigners about Indian womanhood.

Some years ago there appeared a small publication from the pen of a European lady containing the sketches of five 'distinguished' Indian women. The volume saw the light of day under august patronage. Though not much, it was something in its way. But the real distinction of Indian women has never consisted in simply being captivated by the glare of a materialistic civilization; it has never consisted in merely achieving academic laurels at home or abroad; not certainly in undertaking continental travels, or figuring conspicuously in a court of litigation. Indian womanhood has ideals far nobler than these to show; and with all that foreign writers have done to decry the thousand and one evils, real and imaginary, from which Indian women have been represented to suffer—the 'fiery death,' the 'rigid seclusion,' the 'perpetual widowhood,' the illiteracy and early marriage, and many more nameless horrors in the midst of a glorious civilization,—India has given to the

world her contribution of womanly purity and talent "combined with so much gentleness and with so many truly feminine qualities."

Nay, the contribution has been yet greater ; and with due deference to the Noble Lady who was pleased to write this short panegyric, it is claimed for Indian womanhood that it stands on a still higher platform. It is the difference in the view-point that has caused this difference in the angle of vision. There is a basic difference between the culture of modern Europe and the ancient civilization of India. Matter predominates the West, while the spirit has ever permeated the Indian mind. This explains why the true life of Indian womanhood has ever been a tale of patient suffering under the heavy load of manifold evils which have drawn compassionate tears from their materialistic admirers in the West.

An attempt has been made by the writer in the following pages to show the real womanhood of India as it appears to an Indian, imbued in the traditions of his native land. Believing, as he does, in the lessons of the mythology of his country, he has begun with the ancient mythic lore of India, and has gradually advanced through the epic to the historic cycle. In each story a

distinct emotion of the human heart has been sought to be delineated. The types have been selected very carefully, and the same theme has not been repeated unless prejudice was apprehended to the cycle of narration.

One word more. The Indian youth has read stories from Greek, Latin and Scandinavian mythologies, from the legends of King Arthur and the Great Charlemagne, from the tragedies and comedies of Europe. But has he felt the same interest in these stories as his European compeer does ? Are these stories expected to strike the inmost chord of his heart ? Unconnected with the life of the nation they do not and cannot appeal to the Indian student so forcibly as the heroes and heroines of the land. Why should the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, the Rājasthān and the Rājatarangini be Greek to the young man of Hindusthān ? Yet the sad truth must be told that Portia and Desdemona lend themselves more easily to analysis by the young undergraduate of the Indian University than Seetā or Gāndhārī of the land of his birth. A sad commentary on the state of things prevailing !

In dilating upon a similar theme the Hon'ble Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, in his Convocation Address

of 1909 said, "I have no faith in the efficacy of abstract religious maxims. * * * * But I believe it will be far more profitable to illustrate the fundamental principles of every system of morals and religion by examples of truth, purity, charity, humility, self-sacrifice, gratitude, reverence for the teachers, devotion to duty, womanly chastity, filial piety, loyalty to the King and of other virtues appropriately selected from the great national books of Hindus and Muhammadans. These cameos of character, these ideals of our past portrayed with surpassing loveliness in the immortal writings of our poets and sages would necessarily captivate the imagination and strengthen the moral fibre of our young men, who would thus acquire genuine respect for those principles of life and conduct which have guided in the past countless generations of noble men and women in this historic continent."

It is hoped that the few sketches presented in this small volume, and some more to follow in the near future, will interest our young boys and girls and will also be an incentive for the general reader to further acquaintance with the ever-memorable traditions of the womanhood of India.

CALCUTTA, }
June, 1921.

GOLDQUIN & Co.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE.
I. THE MYTHIC CYCLE	
1. Arundhati (<i>Purity</i>)	3 ✓
2. Sati (<i>Self-consecration</i>)	14 ✓
II. THE EPIC CYCLE	
(A) The Rāmāyana.	
3. Shaibyā (<i>Constancy</i>)	31 ✓
4. Seetā (<i>Self-abnegation</i>)	46 ✓
III. THE EPIC CYCLE	
(B) The Mahābhārat.	
5. Sāvitri (<i>Fidelity</i>)	67 ✓
6. Gāndhārī (<i>Righteousness</i>)	83 ✓
IV. THE HISTORIC CYCLE	
A. Ancient.	
7. Gopā (<i>Renunciation</i>)	97 ✓
8. Supriyā (<i>Philanthropy</i>)	109 ✓
B. Medieval.	
9. Bākpushtā (<i>Benevolence</i>)	125 ✓
10. Samjuktā (<i>Self-respect</i>)	133 ✓
11. Pānnā Bāi (<i>Duty</i>)	159 ✓
12. Padmini (<i>Honour</i>)	167 ✓
C. Modern.	
13. Chānd Sultānā (<i>Patriotism</i>)	197 ✓
14. Durgāvati (<i>Love of Country</i>)	221 ✓
15. Mirā Bāi (<i>Religious Devotion</i>)... ..	234 ✓
16. Kshamāvati (<i>Sacrifice</i>)	246 ✓
17. Ahalyā Bāi (<i>The Ideal Queen</i>)... ..	267 ✓
V. THE CYCLE OF TRANSITION	
18. Devī Sārādāsundari (<i>Saintliness</i>)	291 ✓
19. Mahārāni Swarnamayi C. I. (<i>Public Spirit</i>)	319 ✓
20. Devī Aghorekāmini (<i>Service to Fellowmen</i>)	336 ✓

I
THE MYTHIC CYCLE.



ARUNDHATI.*

(PURITY).

I

Up above the northern clouds, far removed from the home of the “Aurora Borealis”, your eyes will meet on a bright starlit night a group of seven stars floating in the blue transparent ether of the upper regions. This group is called in Hindu Mythology, “The Saptarshi Mandal” or ‘the Constellation of the Seven Sages’. There lives Arundhati in the never-failing company of her dear lord Vashistha. As the reward of her extraordinary devotion to her husband the gods have assigned to her this place of honour among

* Hindu legends point out that Sandhyā, the unsuspecting virgin daughter of Brahmā the Creator, was made party to a sinful thought in a world far higher than ours. But a sin in thought is no lighter than a sin in deed. So the maiden resolved to purge herself clean by penances and mortifications, and was reborn with a purified soul as Arundhati to realise the ideal of her life.

(Vide Kālikā Purānam.)

the Immortals. The Hindu youth in accepting his newly-wedded bride utters a holy text* from the Vedas, and pointing out to her this star of Arundhati lays upon her the holy injunction, "Be chaste in heart and pure in mind even as Arundhati was unto her lord". She is an object of adoration in the Hindu household. She is a beacon light and an inspiration to every Hindu woman. The social fabric of the Hindus has withstood the ravages of time and hopes to live through eternity, because their women have been inspired through ages by ideals such as these. The story of Arundhati, therefore, fittingly opens the series of the lives of the saintly Indian women sought to be delineated in the following pages.

II

Sandhyā was the immaculate, mind-born daughter of Brahmā the Creator, Grand-father of the Immortals. When this world we inhabit was but in its infancy, this maiden was engaged in her religious austerities on the *Chandrabhāga* mountain rising by the side of *Lohitasarovara*, a

* "Ôm Prajāpatir-rishiranustuv chhando kanyā devatā Arundhati darshane biniogah."—This hymn composed by the celestial sage Prajāpati in praise of the Angel of a bride is recited at the time of the showing of the star Arundhati to the bride by the bridegroom.

holy lake mentioned in the Hindu Purānas, from which rose the "*Chandrābhāgā**" of sacred waters.

The eyes revelled in the bewitching charms of the secluded spot, far beyond the gaze of man. It was the home of the blossoming lotus and the lily, made vocal with the song of the swan and many other members of the feathery tribe. It was gay with the gambols of the sportive fawn and the frisking gazelle that meekly watched the graceful dance of the many-coloured peacock, all enjoying themselves on an endless sheet of emerald grass. It was here that the Immortals enjoyed their occasional outings.

The maiden Sandhyā wore out her delicate frame in a very long fast and sleepless vigil. The hardships of her penances drew compassionate tears from the eyes of the gods. But Vishnu, the lord of her worship, had yet to be propitiated, and Sandhyā redoubled her efforts. She watched and prayed and fasted for many a long decade. The grass was her bed when she required one; the bark of the hill-side tree covered her down to the knees, for she would use none of her celestial raiments; the dew drops gave her a drink when she must have one. She

* A tributary of the immortal Sindhu (The Indus).

would not speak to any one,—nay, not utter a single whisper into her own hearing,—for she was keeping the terrible *Vow of Silence*. But in all this a link was missing. Sandhyā had not got her initiation ; her soul was groping in the dark.* The divine sage Vashistha came to her at the bidding of the Creator Himself, and Sandhyā was grateful for all that he did. Vishnu, the object of her worship, came down from His heavenly abode to bless His votaress with His divine grace. The maiden fell prostrate before Vishnu and worshipped Him. Propitiated by her offerings, the Lord of the Immortals proposed to grant her boons. “If thou art pleased at the worship of this unworthy servant of thine, then grant me, O Lord, that your creatures may become proof against the blandishments of Desire before they attain their youth. Grant me, O Lord, that I may lose myself in my future husband and do not know of an existence apart from his. Finally, that I may never look with the eye of lust upon any but the lord of my

* Without initiation no one, however great, is entitled to have his or her prayers heard before God. Lord Jesus, the Son Incarnate and the Immaculate, himself went through the baptism of water in the river Jordon by John the Baptist in camel's hair, and living on locusts and honey. The Vaishnava Saint Ishwar Puri initiated Lord Gourānga who is recognised as an Incarnation of God. Instances could be multiplied.

heart". All her prayers were granted, and Vishnu ordained that the maiden should reappear in the sacrificial fire of the sage Medhātithi, and would be placed in the ever-bright regions of the sun, when her mission on earth would come to an end. Then giving her His choicest blessings, the Lord of the high heavens disappeared in a cloud of celestial glory.

III

By the holy waters of the Chandrabhāgā in Brahmarshi Desha, stood the hermitage of the great sage Medhātithi in an extensive forest tract stretching over hundreds of miles. The hermitage was a veritable picture of uninterrupted peace and happiness. It was a "better land," far better than the one conceived by the English poet who has denied access into it to any living mortal. "Death and Sorrow" could not indeed enter there, but that was no reason why it could not be lit up by the harmless joys and innocent smiles of the hermit girls whose tender little hands were engaged in feeding the fawn or patting the ferocious panther or savage lion which, forgetting their natural jealousies, yielded to the influence of the soul-enthraling strains of hymns sung by the sages of old. The Rishis

forgot themselves, but did not forget the good of the world, when they poured forth their devotion at the feet of God Almighty. The hermitage of Medhātithi was a veritable picture of everlasting peace and happiness.

The sage was celebrating the *Jyotistoma* sacrifice for the good of the world. It was a great offering, and the smoke arising from the libations enveloped the sky. All the gods came there to grace the assembly in the hermitage of the sage. All the gods, of whatever rank, had their share of the sacrificial offerings, and highly pleased at the devoted hospitality of the sage, returned to their respective abodes in their divine chariots. Medhātithi acquired religious merit that never fell to the lot of ordinary sages. The sacrifice ended. But when, at the instance of their preceptor, the disciples of Medhātithi were collecting the remains of the sacrificial fire, O miracle of miracles, what did they find there!

A beautiful baby, radiant as the rising sun, fragrant as the full-blown lotus, soft and tender as the pearl drop that falls on the green blade at early dawn,—a beautiful girl slowly opened her eyes and smiled into the wondering gaze of the bewildered sage. “Adopt this baby and cherish her as your own flesh and blood. It is Sandhyā,

the immaculate, mind-born daughter of Brahmā, reborn to fulfil her sacred mission on earth"—thus proclaimed a voice from the sky, and the sage, with the hairs of his body standing on their ends, listened to it and bowed to it. He took up the baby in his arms and pressed its sweet face to his lips with all the pride of a blessed father. He called the baby Arundhati.*

IV

The baby grew up a divine beauty. She was a delight to all that looked upon her. Flowers sprang at every step of her light feet, and the hermitage of Chandrabhāga echoed with the music of her heavenly voice. The touch of her holy feet sanctified the countryside. Her education was entrusted to veteran matronly hands, the presiding angels of the regions of the sun. There those ideal women instructed her in the virtues of womanly honour and purity. For seven long years did this girl listen to the instruction of her heavenly tutoresses, and the growth of her body proceeded with a steady expansion of her heart and mind. She became the repository of

* "Na runaddhi yato dharmam shā kenāpi cha kāranāt." Since she has not interfered in the least with the due discharge of sacrificial rites, she has been called Arundhati.

knowledge, truth, love and honour. The fame of Arundhati filled the world.

V

Arundhati now grew into perfect womanhood. She crossed the boundary between ignorance and knowledge. She became self-conscious. But did she remember Sandhyā? Did she remember Vashistha, her benefactor, and her prayers to the Lord of her worship? Let us see.

VI

A radiant figure of celestial beauty was the young ascetic, the sage *Vashistha*, a special *protége* of the Creator. He was all that was fine and noble; he was good as good can be. He was sent by the Creator to Sandhyā to show her how she could be restored to the original purity of her soul; and he had shown her the way. *Sandhyā* had been reclaimed. It was, therefore, in the fitness of things that *Brahmā* had set his eyes upon the union of the two souls, one that had raised, ennobled and reclaimed the other. But Arundhati could not now recollect the benefactor of Sandhyā. There was a veil spread over her past, keeping Sandhyā away from Arundhati.

VII

“What folly was it to have looked upon that stranger with the eye of love ?”—Arundhati put this question to herself in a searching self-examination, when one evening she met the young sage *Vashistha* engaged in his devotional exercises in *Mānasāchal*, in the vicinity of her new home. “Is this the outcome of the education I have had ? Is this my self-possession ? O Lord ! I feel my ideal vanishes before me. My heart will break”—and Arundhati ran disconsolate to her preceptress, and there made a clean breast of herself. Her heart, however, was greatly lightened when she made the confession and asked how she could atone for this *one moment* of sinful folly and weakness. How great was her relief, when her friend the lady lifted from her eyes the mysterious veil of forgetfulness, and showed her the maiden Sandhyā who had been reborn as Arundhati, showed her that that stranger was none but the preceptor who had been the means of her purification, and told her that the time was coming when the consummation of her life would be attained by the union of herself with that young sage ! It was so ordained by the Creator, and she was nothing, if she was

not the wedded wife of that favourite son of Brahmā.

The curtain of oblivion dropped again, and Arundhati was sent back to the hermitage of her foster-father. She was now calm like a mighty river that has left behind it its volumes of fury and rushing dirt, and is approaching fullness. Her goal was well within sight. No longer the light-hearted girl that she was, Arundhati waited for the day when she would merge herself into another self, never to reappear as a distinct individuality.

VIII

The sage Medhātithi is holding a great wedding feast. All the gods have been invited to the banquet. Brahmā, Vishnu, Shiva, Indra and all the important members of the Hindu pantheon are present to bless the bride. The sage gives away his daughter to Vashistha ; and at that supreme moment of her life, Arundhati promises to be a true wife to her husband for whom she had given up her life before she was reborn in the sacrificial fire of her adoptive father. She promises in her heart to follow her husband "even as the shadow follows the body." They are now united. They are *one* and an

entire whole. They live for many a happy year, and are at last transferred to the celestial regions to shine there for ever and ever, and to bless the Indian woman who follows her husband in sickness and health, in adversity and prosperity, in life and death.

Why trace any further the earthly career of that ideal Hindu wife, Arundhati? She has no longer a separate individuality. She has lost herself in her Lord, as a river loses itself in the vast, unbounded ocean and cannot be separated from it.



SATI.

(SELF-CONSECRATION).

I

Nārada, the lightfooted messenger of the gods, visited the three worlds and invited one and all to the great *Vājapeya* sacrifice that the celestial peer Daksha was celebrating in his Marble Palace on the Himalayas. It was little short of a general invitation extended to the gods of all degrees, high and low, to saints, sages and devotees of all denominations, but there was a very noteworthy omission. The list of guests did not include the name of Shiva, or Mahādeo as he is called, the highest of the gods. It was not in the nature of a sad oversight. The omission was wilful and significant.

II

To explain this extraordinary conduct of Daksha, we have to make a little retrospect. Daksha, the eldest son of the Creator Brahmā, was the father of a numerous progeny of daughters. In marrying them he took great care that

in each case the alliance so formed would be quite worthy of the traditions of his family and his position among the Immortals. He was very proud of the high connexions he had formed : only in the case of his youngest daughter Sati who chose to marry Shiva, the match was not after his heart. Shiva was poor, and poverty itself became the richest treasure in him,—poverty that invested him with a peculiar dignity, being consecrated by the spirit of loving service. Poverty in Shiva meant the realization of his soul, freed from all appanages for its noblest flight into the Supreme, to be lost in communion. To Shiva matter was gross and lucre filthy. Being far above desire, he was infinitely above the gods. From his seclusion in the farthest top of the Himalayas, he would look down upon the vanities of his compatriots who rolled in wealth and fattened like sheep in their stalls. The renunciation of Shiva was worthy of that prince of ascetics. Sati had elected him for her lord, and her divine spouse cherished her as the most precious treasure he could boast of.

III

This ill-fated match, though it resulted in an abundance of supreme conjugal bliss between

the contracting parties, was anything but satisfactory in the opinion of Daksha. Brought up in the lap of luxury, Sati was wedded to poverty; she voluntarily gave up using the rich robes and jewels that went to her as her marriage portion from her royal father's home: she wore the spotted skin of a leopard and had the bark of a tree for a change. She had to obey the wishes of a husband whose parlour was the leafy shade of a *Bael* tree, and who revelled in the company of ghosts, goblins, snakes and sundry other abominations to lift them up into divine dignity. The thought itself was gall and wormwood to the haughty Daksha who was by *Brahmā's* choice the suzerain lord over the created world.

IV

Such was the state of Daksha's mind when an incident happened that widened the gulf between him and his divine son-in-law. At a great banquet in the house of the sage Bhrigu to which all the gods were invited, Mahādeo did not show the respect due to Daksha by virtue of his being the father of Shiva's wife, from a sense of moral and spiritual dignity which ought to reign supreme over physical strength and prowess. This offended the vanity of Daksha,

and was enough to set ablaze the wrath that he cherished for his son-in-law. He returned the insult in the choicest abuse he could command and further decreed that the lord of goblins was henceforth to be excluded from all functions in the society of the Immortals. To lead the others, he himself celebrated the great *Vājapeya* sacrifice and Mahādeo was rigidly excluded from all participation in it. Sati had to suffer for her devotion to her husband and forfeited her claim to visit her paternal home.

So Nārada, the messenger of the gods, invited the high and the low to the great feast in Daksha's palace, excluding, of course, the household of Shiva, but he could not help paying a flying visit to Kailāsh on the Himalayas; not so much to make enquiries about Daksha's daughter as to let her have an incidental hint how the wind was blowing in her father's court. For Nārada had a motive in doing so; he was greatly interested in bringing about the fall of the tyrant Daksha who had ridden roughshod over the world for many a year, and the world was longing to be rid of his vagaries. He informed Shiva of what had happened; and to the eager

questions of poor Sati about her father's house, the celestial messenger replied that though he knew much, he was forbidden by her lord to tell her anything. This was all that the unfortunate Sati could elicit from Nārada ; it was enough to excite the curiosity of a woman,—for an affectionate daughter nothing more was needed to make the heart bleed.

VI

By the crystal stream of Alakānandā leaping with its silver foam from cave to rock and rock to ledge in the snow-capped Himalayas, stood the solitary abode of Shiva, the greatest of the Hindu gods. *Kailāsh*, for such was the name of the place, was situated in the loveliest spot that the sublime Himalayas could nestle in their bosom. It was fringed by a ring of lofty pine trees growing on the mountain side, and the picture enclosed defies the writer's pen or the painter's brush. Fruit-trees and flower plants grew there in such abundance, and were so nicely laid out that the inimitable hand of nature was visible at every turn. It was a regular feast of colours reflected from the eternal snows, when the sun and the moon rose and set in alternate succession to do the biddings of the great Lord of the Himalayas.

And at nightfall the subdued gray, when light and darkness met, conjured up a sense of other-worldliness, setting all doubts at rest and sending the heart out on a voyage beyond. The holy calm of the place spread a sacred influence to moderate the fierceness of the heart and was best suited to the meditations of Shiva.

VII

Lost in meditation the great god was seated on a raised altar under a spreading Bael tree. His favourite attendant Nandi stood at a respectful distance, watching the friendly gambols of his master's bull cordially fraternising with the tawny lion that crouched at Sati's feet and carried her on his back when she wanted a ride. There was a holy calm all around. Not a leaf fell from the trees, not a flutter ruffled the breeze. The earth seemed to be under a spell. The eyes of the great god were closed in a beatific trance. Suddenly his heart beat in sympathetic vibration with another heart elsewhere, and obstructed the smooth flow of his meditations. He opened his eyes and found his divine consort standing before him, palms folded, in an attitude of supplication.

VIII

In that submissive gaze of Sati was concentrated the mute eloquence of an agonized heart that spoke more than her lord would like to know. He read on her countenance that the visit of Nārada had done the mischief; he must now accede to the request of his wife hitherto kept in "blissful ignorance" of Daksha's doings. "Will it be consistent with the honour of our house", were the words he spoke, "for my love to be where she will be no welcome visitor?" No words escaped the lips of Sati.

But her pleading gaze fixed on the earth seemed to make the meek reply, "Should a daughter stand on formalities with her parents?" At once the great truth flashed upon the mind of Shiva that the child always finds a warm corner in the mother's bosom. As it is unnatural for the bird to shut out her younglings from her nest, so it is monstrous to suppose that the mother can shut out her daughter from her bosom. Shiva thought for a while and the sweet voice of Sati tinkled through the air, "Does my lord permit me to visit my poor mother who must be unhappy to miss her Sati from the festivals?" Shiva could not hold out any longer; the permission was ac-

corded. But coming events cast their shadows before ; and he was not without his misgivings.

IX

Sati was going to visit her mother after long years of separation. She rode her lion ; Nandi, the faithful retainer of the family, followed her on foot. Dressed in a simple yellow frock without any ornaments or jewels, without the least show of pomp or ceremony as befitted the wife of the god, with life consecrated to meditation and service of love, she was going home to her mother in the royal mansions of the lordly Daksha, now festive on a gala occasion. She imagined her rich sisters, bedecked with jewels, coming to add to the gaiety of the banquet, and looking down upon her self-imposed poverty to which she was wedded,—poverty, the real key to all the treasures of earth and heaven ; but she would not mind their slight so long as she was sure of a hearty welcome from her parents, her mother especially, at the unexpected visit. Her hopes were high and her heart was full. Alas, if she could only lift the veil that dimmed her vision ! But that was not to be.

X

She passes through the old familiar scenes, favourite haunts of her childhood, and the trees

bend down their boughs to do her homage. Flowers blossom on withered branches and strew the pathway to welcome their celestial visitant. The woodland is made vocal with the welcome notes of a thousand little songsters of the vale. Their whilom friend is coming home on a short holiday, and birds, plants, trees and flowers vie with one another in the warmth of their reception. Sati sees at a distance the white turrets of her father's marble palace, and her heart leaps with joy as she nears the porch. On she comes, and crosses the yard. A minute, and she flings herself into the extended arms of her mother in a long and close embrace. Let not the pen of mortal man disturb the supreme felicity of this meeting of hearts.

XI

Who can describe the measure of happiness the affectionate mother experienced at this unexpected meeting? What words can gauge the depth of joy the beloved daughter felt at the hearty reception from her mother after years of absence from the paternal roof?

But the stern father, though half inclined to throw all formalities to the winds and run to greet his daughter, turned his face from the scene,

and sat immovable by the sacrificial altar like an adamant rock. A sharp conflict was raging in his heart between parental emotion and pride, and pride won the day. He would not recognize the daughter that shared the fortunes of Shiva whom he hated with the hatred of hell. Sati came and fell prostrate at the feet of her father, little expecting the cold neglect that would fall to her lot. But the peer turned away from that shabbily dressed woman who came there as the wife of a mendicant. The contrast she formed to her rich sisters in dress, in speech and in general culture, seemed to exclude her from all participation in the functions marked by barbaric display and vain glory. Her sisters talked before her in subdued whispers, and pitied her on her ill-fated selection of a husband who had neither the sense of decency nor the means to give her a dress worthy of a social gathering.

XII

, soared

The words of unsolicited pity her sisters kept incessantly dinning into her ears were galling to a degree. It was to Sati a really painful discovery to miss in her richly-wedded sisters the companions of her childhood, the ingenuous friends of her early days. They were changed. The

good in them had run out : they were now wedded to luxury, wealth and the hollowness of fashionable society. Sati would not have minded the pinpricks of her sisters ; the home-thrust of her stern father cut her to the quick. Her sense of dignity rebelled against the injustice of the cold neglect shown to her. It was an insult to her sense of self-respect. It was an insult to her husband Shiva who embodied in himself all the forces of good in the universe. Realising her position, Sati turned to her mother for consolation.

XIII

At that psychological moment when the heart of Sati had almost reached its breaking point, an incident occurred that acted as the proverbial straw on the camel's back. Nandi was waiting at the gate and feeling miserable at what was happening inside. He wished to rescue his mistress from the difficult position she was forced into by inducing her to come back to Kailāsh. Further delay meant further humiliation, and Nandi made up his mind to seek her out and communicate his plan. Daksha kept a keen eye upon his movements, and, like a tiger baulked of his prey, vented his spleen upon the servant in the absence of the master. "Churlish mountain

dog", he exclaimed wrathfully, "you should have been at this time at the heels of thy tipsy master, instead of being in cultured society from which the goblin-chief of Kailāsh has been excluded at my decree". Thus talked on the blinded Daksha, forgetting that he was speaking in the hearing of his daughter. It was the last drop that filled the cup of her misery to over-flowing. A dutiful daughter as she was, she was, above all, a faithful wife. She could no longer tolerate the insolence of her father. She did not utter a single syllable of protest. But her ears refused to hear when insult poured in torrents upon the husband—the lord of her heart. Her sight failed her when her gaze met the dark scowls of her father's eyes. Her nostrils refused to breathe the air that was charged with calumny and vituperation against her dear lord. Her legs trembled, her body shook and she fell down dead where she stood. The spirit left her body, soared higher than the sacrificial smoke of Daksha's palace and passed out of sight to mingle with the great spirit of her husband in distant Kailāsh. Something disturbed the great god in his peaceful meditations. He felt its shock and opened his eyes. Seeing nothing he again fell into his pensive mood.

XIV

Nandi ran disconsolate towards Kailāsh. His lamentations filled the skies and reached the ears of his master. His swollen eyes, his ruffled mien and broken sobs communicated the sad tidings to the Lord of Kailāsh. He took in the situation at a glance. For once the wrath of the great god whose great heart was impervious to the failings of the flesh broke into an all-consuming fire. The keenness of a poignant sorrow overpowered him, and the fire of fury that flashed forth from his eyes brought into being a messenger of Death that dealt out destruction right and left. The tyrant Daksha with his godless court could not stay the hand of Doom. The fire of Shiva's wrath consumed the proud chief and his famous Vājpeya sacrifice had a calamitous end.

XV

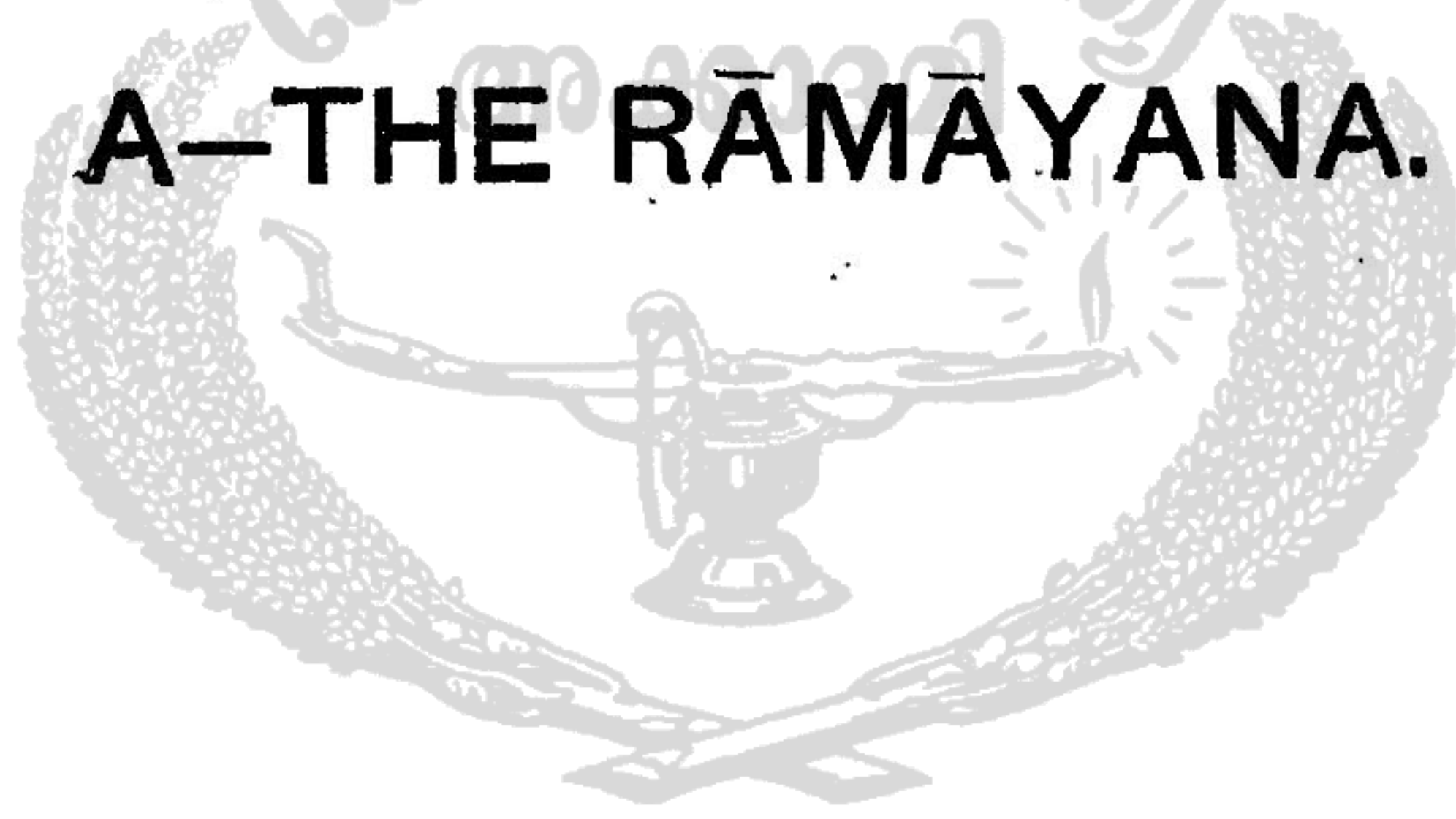
This is perhaps the first instance in the annals of the world when a woman resented an insult to her husband by making the supreme sacrifice by way of a protest. The story told and retold in Indian soil has infused the Indian woman with a very lofty ideal of wifedom. She has received the unstinted adoration of her

countrymen and country-women and has been styled Sati (the chaste wife), when devotion to her husband has led her to a similar course under similar circumstances. We present the story particularly to that section of our readers through whom the very name of Sati will send a thrill of shudder, to whom it will conjure up a lovely young Hindu widow immolating herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, and who will bless the name of Lord William Bentinck for his famous Minute of 1829, penalising the committing, aiding and abetting of Sati in India. The custom, as it developed in post-Mogul India, was certainly blind and barbarous: all spontaneous outpourings, when consolidated into a custom enforced by religious sanction, degenerate into a mummary or heartless and soulless form of slavery; but a reference to these pages will explain the extreme religious fervour and self-forgetting frenzy of love underlying the reckless disregard of life shown by a Hindu widow.

II.

THE EPIC CYCLE.

A—THE RĀMĀYANA.



SHAIBYĀ.

(CONSTANCY).

I

In *Vaikuntha*, the world of light, Vishnu was to preside at an annual social gathering of great importance. Accordingly most of the gods assembled there with all the sages and saints that inhabited the upper, middle and lower regions of the created universe. The gods, demi-gods, sages and saints of all denominations were seated in the order of their rank, when a flourish of divine trumpets heralded the approach of Vishnu into the audience-hall. The assembly rose in a body to greet the Lord of Vaikuntha, and when the thousand throats mingled in a hymn of praise to the God of Light, trumpets announced that the function had commenced. They talked on various topics of earthly and unearthly concern, and the conversation drifted on to the comparative religious merits acquired by kings on earth.

The hoary sage Vashistha spoke very highly of the benefactions of king Harish Chandra of Ayodhyā, and threw the challenge that no suitor had ever come back disappointed from the royal court of Ayodhyā. His friend Vishwāmitra took up the challenge, and resolved to put to the test the much talked-of bounty of the king. It bode him no good. The assembly dispersed, curious to know how the matter would end, for every one knew that the sage Vishwāmitra was up to any mischief he was bent upon. Only Vashistha grew pensive, for the situation was of his creation.

II

Harish Chandra was the son and successor of king Trishanku of the solar line of Kshatriya Princes, and an ancestor of the far-famed Rām Chandra of the Indian epic. He held his court in Ayodhyā, past which flowed the gentle stream of the holy-watered Saraju through many a smiling plain and teeming valley. Harish Chandra was king of Ayodhyā and suzerain lord over the rest of Indian princes. His arm was long enough to reach the evil-doer in the remotest corners of his vast dominions. It was at the same time strong enough to protect the weak, to succour the distressed and to wipe the scalding tear from the

eyes of those that wept. King Harish Chandra was admittedly the flower of Indian chivalry, and reputed all over the country for his all-embracing charity. Queen Shaibyā, an equally kind-hearted lady, shared his throne as well as the noble sentiments that marked him out as a great king of the Heroic Age of India. Prince Rohitāshwa, the only offspring that blessed the union between the King and the Queen was the worthy son of worthy parents.

III

The King and Queen were just concluding a sacrificial rite they had undertaken for the welfare of their subjects at the instance of the sage Vashistha, Spiritual Director of the Solar kings of Ayodhyā. The ceremony passed off without any hitch; and on the fourth day of the fast the royal couple were engaged, as an essential part of the rite, in making presents to holy men and charities to the poor. The doors of the royal treasury were thrown wide open; the coffers were emptied; and innumerable Brahmin and other suitors came back satisfied, blessing the name of King Harish Chandra and his Queen. Not a man was turned away empty-handed, and the royal couple were about to retire after the strain of

four days' fast and vigil, when a porter announced the arrival of the sage Vishwāmitra at the gate. No sooner was the announcement made than the King and the Queen rose to receive the sage, and with the courtesy due to such an honoured guest enquired if their unworthy selves could be of any service to that holy anchorite.

"I ask for a present from the most bountiful king on earth," replied the sage, "and I hope it will be worthy of the hands that will give, and those that will accept it."

"We will deem ourselves thrice blessed," was the King's prompt reply, "if a sage of your standing accept all our earthly possessions. Though the gift is too small for your acceptance, if it can propitiate Your Holiness, I give you to-day, without the least hesitation, my everything, my throne, my kingdom, crown and jewels, all."

All the court wondered. It was an awful moment of breathless suspense. The fate of their beloved king hung on the utterance of a begging mendicant.

"The present is, indeed, worthy of Harish Chandra whose fame has reached the world of the Immortals. I accept it. But where is the supplementary fee without which the present made brings no merit to the donor?"

“Ten thousand pieces in gold,” said the unsuspecting King, “will go to Your Holiness. Let not posterity say that King Harish Chandra halted in charity, the pronounced object of his life. The fee will be counted out forthwith from our treasury.”

“By virtue of your gift, O Rājā,” said the cunning sage, “the treasury belongs to me. You can claim nothing on this earth as your own. So, you must look for the amount elsewhere.”

Harish Chandra found himself caught in a snare. But the situation was of his own making.

There was not an inch of land on this wide world that he could call his own. There was, however, no going back upon the word he had given. He thought for a while and said, “It is in the Shāstras, O Holy Sage, that *Kāshi*, the abode of Shiva, is beyond the boundaries of the earth. I will raise the amount there to redeem my pledge. Be pleased, Gracious Ascetic, to grant me a month’s time to enable me to keep my word.”

“Agreed,” said the sage, as he chuckled within himself at the prospect that the victim was fairly within his grasp. “A month hence I come to claim my fee. No further postponement will do. It is not in my nature to be trifled with.”

The bargain was struck. Far from mortal

gaze Nemesis spun a tangled web that held the fate of the woe-begone monarch fast in its silken meshes. The entrance was wide open, but the exit was closed.

IV

The ex-king now made ready for departure. His queen Shaibyā who was by his side was watching the sad turn events were taking. A very queer feeling agitated the soul of Harish Chandra. Not that he regretted this unexpected change in his fortune ; the king was a stranger to such faint-heartedness.

He thought of his poor wife and child whose rights he had bartered away in a moment of self-forgetfulness.

“Shaibyā, dear, I have to leave for *Kāshi* to work out my destiny. You have not foregone your claims to a home in what is now the kingdom of Vishwāmitra : it will be some consolation to me to know that you have found a safe asylum with your boy under the sheltering roof of your father.”

“Woe unto the day,” replied the queen, “that finds me live to hear these unkind words from my dear husband. I have never known a moment of separation from my lord. I have never longed

for any happiness except to be by the side of my King in weal and woe. If the husband has no home in the land where he was the sovereign lord the night before, how can the wife have a comfortable home in that unholy wilderness ?”

Shaibyā wept “a river of tears.” Harish Chandra found the lady firm in her resolve to share his fallen fortunes, and did not attempt further argumentation.

“I regret, lady, the indiscreet utterance that has caused you so much pain. Rest assured, it was the tongue and not the heart that was at fault. ere I should consider what agony of despair and helplessness brought the words to my lips.”

So, without any further ado, the unfortunate royal family, husband, wife and child, left for their unknown destination to enact a new scene in their life's drama. The invisible Fates kept them company.

V

The scene now shifts to the streets of Kāshi. The thoroughfares are crowded by priests chanting their morning prayers, pilgrims on their way to the *Gangā* to take a plunge in her sacred waters, pious men hailing from different parts

of the country to offer their homage at the temple of Shiva, sight-seers, beggars and sundry other persons of different nationalities. Our readers will have no difficulty in recognising in this motley crowd the towering features of Harish Chandra leading his boy by the hand and followed by his devoted wife Shaibyā. For the last three weeks he has tried his best to raise the money to redeem his pledge, but the money is not forthcoming. He is a king no longer; his word is not sufficient to push his case with creditors. He has no land to mortgage or jewels to pawn. He is not, therefore, an approved borrower. He has no friends to advance him what he wants. Chance acquaintances are lavish in their advice, but chary of their gold. People sympathise with him, but show a cold front to his prayer for relief.

Harish Chandra became sad, and the tears of poor Shaibyā swelled the volumes of *Gangā's* waters, when their helplessness became daily manifest.

The last day of the contract arrived. True to the point the sage Vishwāmitra sought his victim out in the streets of Kāshi and demanded his dues.

"The thirtieth sun is going to set, Harish Chandra," he thundered forth in a peremptory

tone, "and a short hour remains before you must redeem your pledge, or go to eternal perdition in default."

"All my efforts have proved unavailing in procuring the money," said Harish Chandra, and his voice shook as he essayed the reply. "Kindly wait, O Holy Sage, a few minutes more, and I hope yet to be able to give you your fee."

In a last desperate effort Harish Chandra turned to the slave-market of the city, and offered himself for sale. His honour was at stake; the cherished ideal of his life was vanishing while he was yet alive. He chose to be a bond-slave rather than break his vow.

A *chandāla*, the keeper of the public crematory of Kāshi, bought him for five thousand gold pieces. It was the highest price he could fetch. But Vishwāmitra would not accept a single piece short. There was still half to be raised.

Poor Shaibyā was a silent spectator to this transaction. She did not faint; no cry escaped her lips. She saw that her King had been true to his sacred promise. Could she not help him in supplementing the money secured? "O God!" she prayed in the inmost recesses of her heart, "if I could fetch with my child the remaining half!"

“The sun is going to set upon an unredeemed pledge of King Harish Chandra of the Solar Dynasty, far famed for his honesty on this earth,”—these terrible words of his tormentor rang through the pavements of the streets of Kāshi, and the echoes died away in the distant horizon on Gangā’s breast.

“Not yet, O Holy Sage,” replied the faithful queen, “not so long as Shaibyā lives and can find a purchaser in the slave-market yonder.”

Shaibyā faced the ordeal quite heroically. She went up to an old Brahmin who happened to be looking out for a maid-servant, and with tears that told her story implored him to buy her with her child.

The price was counted out. The claims of Vishwāmitra were satisfied in full. The pledge of the king was redeemed. Husband and wife separated and went to work as galley-slaves. The cups of their misery yet wanted a drop to be brimful.

VI

Months passed and the world moved on in its accustomed groove. Why unfold the harrowing tale of misery, that befell those victims of inexorable fate? They were in life-long bondage and had to slave it out as best as they could.

Harish Chandra kept watch at his post in the southern yard of the cremation ground of Kāshi, down the river Gangā. His duty was to collect for his master the funeral fee from the relatives of the dead. Being constantly with the dead did Harish Chandra become dead to the ordinary emotions of the human heart? Let us see.

It was a stormy pitch-dark night in the month of *Bhādra* when the waters of the Gangā overflowed her banks. Harish Chandra was at his post. The darkness outside could be matched only by the inner gloom that had taken possession of his heart. Accustomed to the howls of dogs and jackals disputing sway over a half-burnt corpse, he did not notice their yells that night. The dying embers of a dog-scaring faggot or the leaping flames of a fresh burning pyre did not act as a stimulus to his sight that evening. He stood at his post, the picture of the unrelenting Gateman at the portals of Death.

VII

Suddenly the heart-rending wails of a woman startled the gate-keeper. It was a fresh arrival. No mourners followed the dead. A poor unfortunate mother bore the corpse of her only boy,

covered in a simple solitary winding-sheet. She sat by a spent-up pile, laid the lifeless burden on her bosom, and cursed her fate. All that remained to her as a solace to her miserable life was gone. The boy, a child of twelve summers, had been bitten by a venomous snake and breathed his last. Her lamentations broke the silence that reigned there. She was raving about a kingdom and a fee, and muttered something about a pledge redeemed.

The interests of his master at once brought Harish Chandra to the spot. He demanded, as usual, the customary funeral fee, and stretched his hand for the shroud of the dead.

“Don’t defile us, gate-keeper, with your touch, I beseech you. My darling Rohitāshwa has felt the touch of better hands than yours. Stand aloof, and you will have your dues.” Harish Chandra stepped back at a respectful distance. He caught the word “Rohitāshwa.” The past flashed before his eyes with all the scenes coming back in quick succession. Was it his own flesh and blood, the heir to the throne of Ayodhyā, that lay before him low in the dust to receive the last rites from his own hands? His head began to reel. He tried to listen to the fragments that dropped from the woman’s lips.

“Shaibyā has preferred to lose all,” the woman went on. “She has lost her kingdom, her husband, her only child, the apple of her eye. She has sacrificed her freedom, the birth-right of a human being—.”

The ears of Harish Chandra stood expectant.

“Shaibyā has not forsaken righteousness. She has helped her dear husband in keeping his plighted truth. Will the God of Truth and Righteousness abandon her at this supreme hour of trial?”

She blamed herself for the passing weakness of the moment, and thanked the name of God.

Harish Chandra could not contain himself any longer. His heart was not flint or steel. He was yet a man.

“No, lady,” said Harish Chandra in a voice hoarse with emotion, “the God of Truth and Righteousness cannot abandon you. Queen Shaibyā, it is your unworthy husband that stands before you. I am now the steward of the crematorium under the master who bought me the day we separated. God willed it and God has willed this meeting of ours under very painful circumstances. Arise, Queen Shaibyā, and give our child the rites that are due to the departed.”

VIII

There was a sudden transformation in the scene. The Angel of Truth descended from the skies riding on a pencil of celestial light. The deserted countryside was illumined with the glow of sacred radiance. Sweetly and softly the figure spoke, and the music of his voice enchanted the ears on which it fell like April showers.

“Arise, Queen Shaibyā, and rejoice that you have successfully stood the ordeal, for verily, I say unto you, daughter of the mortals, that God cannot abandon those that serve truth and righteousness. Noble King Harish Chandra, you have gained immortality for all ages to come. Awake, boy Rohitāshwa, and continue to be the darling of your parents. Conquered by the nobility of your soul, O best of men, the sage has given back the kingdom to your minister. Go back to Ayodhyā and be once more unto your subjects the fatherly protector that you were.”

The voice ceased. With the peep of gray dawn the royal couple found themselves not on the banks of the Gangā, but at the gates of their capital Ayodhyā, with the old minister standing at the head of a gay procession ready to accord a hearty reception to their King and

Queen. The shouts of “Long live King Harish Chandra,” “Long live Shaibyā the virtuous Queen,” rent the air.

The sage lost his wager, and the meshes of the web spun by the Fates snapped in two.



SEETĀ.

(SELF-ABNEGATION).

I

Seetā is a name to conjure with throughout the length and breadth of Hindusthān. There is not a Hindu household in India where Seetā does not receive the unstinted homage of adoration : not a Hindu woman but draws her inspiration from this immortal creation of Vālmiki's pen. The life-story of Seetā is a thrice-told tale ; but it has never lacked the odour of freshness. It is a perennial fountain of charm to the old and young alike. The purifying flame of Seetā's life has kept alive the sacred torch of domestic bliss in the Hindu home, and, for ages to come will act as a beacon-light to the Indian woman who has loved her husband and has suffered in so doing. We are told of Adam's wife who sinned the sin of disobedience ; the *Iliad* tells us of the beautiful Helen who disgraced herself. But

Vālmiki's Seetā is a unique creation in the world's literature towering majestically over truth and fiction.

II

The story of Seetā's birth is shrouded in mystery. Tradition says that Seetā was not "of woman born." While Janaka, King of *Mithilā** was, according to ancient custom, ploughing a plot of land to raise a sacrificial altar, a beautiful baby was dug up by the furrow. Taking the child gratefully as a gift from the Earth Goddess he called it Seetā,† and brought it up with all the care of a fond father. The child grew up a pretty young maiden when the king announced a *Swayamvara* for the princess. Many suitors came. Most of them went back dishonoured for they failed to pass the test. But Rām Chandra, son of King Dasharath of the neighbouring kingdom of *North Koshalā*‡ passed the test and gained the prize. Beauty was mated to Valour, and Grace and Sweetness of Devotion to the Majesty of Duty.

* Modern Tirhut in North Behar.

† The ploughed-up.

‡ Ayodhyā.

III

No reception could be more cordial than what Seetā had from her husband's people. No princess could have started married life with a richer promise than she. Yet no tale is more harrowing, no woe more heart-rending, no life more full of sorrows and sufferings than hers. Rām Chandra, as the eldest-born of King Dasharath, would be installed on the throne next morning; Seetā would get her rightful place by his side as queen of Koshala. The arrangements were complete, and the city was festive in view of the auspicious ceremony. But all of a sudden a cruel bolt fell from the serene and cloudless blue. As the result of a Court-intrigue Rām Chandra was sent into exile for fourteen years, and his step-brother Bharata was nominated king instead. The hopes of Seetā were shattered.

This was the beginning of the woes that kept her company through life.

IV

Rām Chandra bowed to the decree of his father. He made ready to depart for his unknown home in the forest. Bathed in tears his

parents stood round him and cursed their fate. But he was going into exile to enable his father to redeem a plighted truth. He would not stay for all the world. And the faithful Seetā would share the hardship of the forest life with her husband. To her the palace without her husband was like the day without the Sun. It was worse than a dismal wilderness. "You are not used to forest life, my dear," said the prince, when he went to bid her good-bye, "stay here to comfort my old parents in their sorrow." Seetā replied, "Hardship is joy itself in your company. The dirt of the forest track that will settle on my body I will wear as the finest sandal-paste. The scorching rays of the summer Sun will seem cooler than the coolest spray at the sight of your face that has a unique charm for your beloved Seetā. The sharp blades of the *Kusha* grass I will remove with my feet that my husband may tread the way with ease. The forest will be to me an Eden of bliss in your company. Leave me not, or leave me to separation and certain death."

Seetā would not stay behind. So the party consisting of Rām, his younger brother Lakshman and Seetā left Ayodhyā, while the city wept.

V

Spending some time in the hermitage of the saint Bharadvāj the party moved on to *Chitrakuta*, where they fixed their temporary abode, and made the most of their time in games and manly sports. Thence they moved further south into the great forest of *Dandakāranya* on the Godāvari. They built a hut of leaves in a central spot of the forest called *Panchavati*, and thought of spending the remainder of their exile in that secluded region.

VI

Seetā by this time grew fairly accustomed to her life in exile. Nature sported in all her glory in the grove of Panchavati, and Seetā, gay and light-hearted as the singing lark, frisked with the frisking fawn in this veritable home of romance and poetry. As into the arms of her mother, Seetā flung herself readily into the bosom of Nature, and like the fairest lily among the lilies that bloomed, the merriest bird among the birds that sang, like the loveliest maid among the sylvan deities of the grove, she graced the country-side with her matchless beauty and innocence. She was free as the air she breathed. Her

rambles with her husband through the lawns and meadows by the river-side were a source of bliss not tasted before. O the happy months she passed in the Arcadian grove of Panchavati! Would she could only see into the future!

VII

The report of the beauty of Seetā having reached the ears of Rāvana, the demon king* of *Lankā*, he was on the look-out for an opportunity to steal her away. One morning when both Rām and Lakshman happened to be away from their hut, Rāvana disguised as a mendicant presented himself before the gate as a guest of the family. Hospitality could not be ignored. In an evil moment the simple-hearted lady stepped out of the threshold. She was instantly seized by the false mendicant, and before she could well realize her helplessness she was lifted into the devil's chariot which was speeding away to his sea-girt island home in distant *Lankā*. She violently protested, and screamed and wept,—but Rāvana would not mind her piteous wails, and lashed his horses till their breath was out. So Seetā, like Proserpine when she was carried away by Dis, flung her jewels

* A powerful Non-Aryan king of ancient Ceylon.

along the way that her Rām Chandra might guess the cause of her disappearance.

VIII

In the meanwhile the brothers returned and found Seetā missing. Her disappearance was as sudden as it was unexpected. Words fail to describe the acuteness of the grief into which Rām Chandra fell. His heart was about to break, and his mind was almost unhinged. He questioned every tree and every bush,—every bird and every fawn,—he asked every rock and every ledge to tell him where his Seetā was. Only echo answered ‘where.’ He sought every nook and every cranny, but Panchavati could not give him back his lost treasure. His lamentations filled the grove and rent the air. Like one who has lost all relish of life Rām raved inconsolate.

For some days the brothers wandered through the South Forest when they came upon a silken scarf which Rām Chandra recognised to be that of Seetā. A few steps more, and some jewels were noticed that could belong to none other than the princess of Ayodhyā. Link after link they followed the clue, day after day they crossed miles of the dense forest till they reached

*Kiskindhyā** and met Sugreeva, a monkey chief† in exile. They struck up a strange friendship, and the monkey chief told Rām Chandra how his wife had been carried off by Rāvana, the demon king of Lankā, and of a certainty consigned to his harem. Sugreeva placed the entire resources of his kingdom at the disposal of his friend in his attempt to rescue his wife.

IX

Hanumān, the trusted lieutenant of Sugreeva, was sent to find out the whereabouts of Seetā. He crossed over to Lankā, and effected an entrance into the pleasure garden of the king. There he discovered the lady, seated under an Asoka tree, a picture of dejection and despair. Guarded by a dozen of fierce-looking female slaves, she was allowed a half hour's respite from her tormentors' attentions. Her locks were dishevelled, clothes tattered, body pale and emaciated, and eyes streaming with tears. She was always muttering the name of her dear husband to herself. Seetā was not in the pink of health that lit up the corridors of Ayodhyā's palace: she was not the blooming lily that sweetened

* Somewhere south of modern Mysore.

† An independent Non-Aryan chief of the Deccan.

the grove of Panchavati. She was a prisoner in an alien land expecting every moment to be done to a cruel death by the orders of a baffled king. Her only sorrow was she could not once see her lord before her death.

Hanumān somehow managed to drop the hint that the night of her woe was nearing dawn, as Rām Chandra would soon be there to recover her. Seetā looked up. The sweet name of Rām Chandra electrified her frame, and she wished she might live to hear that name again.

X

The war is over. With the help of the army lent by Sugreeva, Rām Chandra has crossed the sea, invaded Lankā and killed Rāvana with all his family. The Rākshasa army has been destroyed. Rāvana's brother Bibheesana, a friend and ally of Rām Chandra, has been placed on the throne of Lankā. Seetā has been rescued.

But hitherto we have not seen much of Vālmiki's Seetā except that she is an ordinary creation, a loving and dutiful wife passing through a series of misfortunes that fall to the lot of most women. But the drama of her life has yet to be acted out.

XI

The conqueror of Lankā has not made a state-entry into the captured city. He waits outside and holds a reception on the beach in a pandal erected for the purpose. There is a large gathering of chiefs, generals and other notables. Rām Chandra is seated on a throne of gold. Bibheesana, the friendly chief of Lankā, leads Seetā in a closed palanquin to restore her to her husband. Everybody is glad beyond measure that the sufferings of the lady have come to an end. Seetā alights, and at that moment of intense self-absorption in the thought of union with her lord, she quite loses sight of the sea of human heads. She ascends the steps with her eyes fixed at the feet of her beloved husband. Suddenly she hears the terrible words : “Seetā must stop there. She cannot be taken back. She has lived for a long time in Rāvana’s palace without a friend to give her protection.” She staggers back. The terrible words that greet her ears fall like the words of doom ; but the voice is the voice of Rām Chandra, her husband, the fountain-head of love and honour.

The voice is ringing in her ears. Seetā steps back and leans against the railing. The words

pierce her soul like a burning shaft : they smoke their way into the tenderest part of her vitals and char them black. With difficulty she supports herself against a prop, and avoids a fall. Her head reels and her sight grows dim. The tantalus-cup of bliss recedes when her parched lips are about to taste it.

XII

Seetā could have more readily met the death she had been snatched from than the doom that awaited her. She had now nothing to hope for, nothing to strive for, nothing, in short, to live for. To her the world went out of joint. Sick of life, Seetā turned to Lakshman with a pleading gaze—not to ask him to intercede with his brother in her behalf, but to help her to put an end to the life she loathed.

The pyre was ready. Seetā would fling herself into the flames to make an end of the life she could not devote to the service of her husband. The flames were leaping with a thousand tongues ready to devour their victim. A moment of awful suspense hushed speech into silence. With the blue waves dashing against it in endless ripples, with the blue sky hanging

over it in boundless emptiness, the white sandy beach stood a mute spectator to this amazing sacrifice.

“If I have ever been false to my husband in thought, in speech or in deed, let the flames consume me here and hereafter.” With these solemn words of adjuration Seetā leapt into the burning pile amidst the growing excitement of a compassionate crowd. But lo! the flames slackened in their fury and the faggots did not burn. Up rose a radiant figure of celestial beauty from amidst the flames holding Seetā in his arms, and making straight for the throne of the bewildered husband addressed him thus :—
“O Prince of Koshalā, judge not your wife by the standard of mortal man. She is far above the failings of the flesh. She is pure and true, and the Angel of Fire stands before you to vouch that Seetā is pure as fire itself and comes unscathed out of the ordeal. Remember, Prince, the promise you made before my tribunal when you led her to the altar years ago.” The voice ceased and the Angel disappeared. The crowd raised a lusty cheer in the name of Seetā. Unable to bear the tremendous weight of her happiness, Seetā fainted away in the arms of her husband.

XIII

The year wore out. The exile of Ayodhyā sat again on the throne of his ancestors. Seetā smiled again and tried to forget the episode of Lankā. Her new happiness came as a screen between Koshala and Panchavati. The kindness of her husband was so intense, so overpowering, that at times she shuddered to think of losing it again. She had, indeed, reasons to do so, for fresh troubles were ahead. Ayodhyā poohpoohed the story of the Fire Ordeal held in distant Lankā. Rumour reared its thousand heads and invaded the palace with all the forces at its disposal. Trusty agents confirmed the truth, and Rām Chandra bowing to the people's will thought of removing this prolific source of idle gossip by abandoning his wife. He knew her to be chaste, but there was no choice in the matter. He was king by the people's good will. He must please his people at any cost. It was a duty inviolable. He lost the husband in the king. Seetā was abandoned to her fate in a forest. Tantalus again ! The greater the pity, for Seetā was now in an interesting condition. Poor woman ! She was told at starting that she was being taken on a pleasure trip. Her attendant Lakshman told her

his mission later on. She did not complain. She only said, "It is not for me to question the wisdom of the step my husband, the King, has taken. What he has done has been for the best. I am reaping as I sowed."

XIV

Reader, if it is not too much for your nerves to follow this harrowing tale of misery, come let us visit this wronged innocence in the hermitage of Vālmiki. Twelve long years have come and gone, and the world has not missed much of the banished Queen of Ayodhyā. She has been picked up by the hoary sage and provided with a woodland hospitality and a father's care. Lava and Kusha, the twin sons of Seetā, now full twelve years old, are dressed up like hermit children. They do not know their parentage, though they have received from the sage an education befitting Kshattriya boys. They can shoot, fence, wrestle, sing and recite the Vedas. They are now the sole delight of their mother's heart. Taught by the sage they sing before their mother the life-story of Rām Chandra to the tune of the harp. Seetā listens to the music with rapt attention. Every word of the song drops sweet nectar. It sustains her life. With this solitary consolation Seetā

brings up the royal children of the *Ikshwāku* line with the conviction that sooner or later they will get their dues. She is not the playful young bride as we found her in Panchavati. She is, no doubt, in a hermitage,—the home of peace and good will,—with its sporting fawns, and singing birds and blooming lotuses by the side of smiling hermit girls,—but the world of difference it has made to Seetā ! She misses her husband by her side : she misses the joy of her life. The banished Queen of Ayodhyā drags her miserable life from day to day in blissful ignorance of any further troubles that may be brewing.

XV

When things were in this pass the sage Vālmiki was invited by King Rām Chandra to the *Aswamedha* sacrifice he was celebrating to mark his sovereign sway. As no ritual is deemed complete in the religious law books of the Hindus unless the lawfully married wife joins in the performance, Rām Chandra had a golden statue of Seetā made and placed by his side at the inauguration of the ceremony. What news could be more gladsome to Seetā ! She was yet esteemed by her husband as his only consort ! Seetā

forgot all the woes of her life, and her heart went out in tears of love and gratitude to her husband. She would fain suffer a thousand painful years of separation for such a supreme moment of happiness.

XVI

In due time the sage honoured the king's invitation. The twin princes accompanied him. Their sweet music threw a spell over the Royal Court. The exactness of the details, the pathos, and the melody of the song attracted the king's notice. When the identity of the boys was revealed to him, Vālmiki implored the king to take back his wife whose innocence he solemnly avowed before the assembled Court. Rām Chandra was half inclined to accede to the request of the sage, but to be a model of virtues before his subjects as he ought to have been, and to remove the least vestige of suspicion still lurking in their minds, the point was raised that Seetā should submit to a fresh test of her innocence, before the assembled people.

On this memorable morning the Court of Ayodhyā is crowded to suffocation. There are princes and chiefs hailing from different provinces, sages and hermits from their forest seclusions,

and many other notables from far and near. They are anxiously watching the proceedings. Seetā has obeyed the mandates of her protector in exile. She has come that she may get her rightful place by the side of her lord, the King of Koshala. Hope has duped her again.

She stands before this vast concourse of men. The sage explains the situation. Her husband has expressed his willingness to take her back.

Seetā does not know if to believe her ears. She looks grateful. Tears of joy trickle down her cheeks.

The sage continues :—"Seetā will be taken back if she will agree to give a fresh proof of her innocence."

Too much for the injured lady. From her girlhood Seetā has meekly borne her lot. Pure as purity itself she has suffered as no woman can. She still loves and cherishes her husband as if the world has gone all right with her. Rām Chandra has once drawn her close to him as the most loving husband does ; the next moment his strong sense of duty has come between. Yet a breath of murmur has not escaped her lips. She is, however, a woman, and flesh and blood can bear no more. A fresh insult has been added to the injury already done.

Seetā looks bewildered. The castle she has built in the air vanishes no sooner formed. She is rudely awakened from her dreams. A most cruel blow has been given to the self-respect of this tender-hearted lady. It is more than human endurance, more than patience itself can bear.

Seetā does not look up. She makes a final appeal to her mother, the Goddess Earth. "If I have ever cherished, O Omniscient Goddess," she sobs in the bitterness of her sorrow, "if I have ever thought of any one in my life save and except my husband, the best of Raghu's line, then may the name of Seetā be cursed in ages to come. Strong in the strength of this holy love and single-minded devotion to my husband I am sure, O Goddess, you will take me in your arms and lull me to the sleep that knows no waking. Open your arms wide, my mother, and take me to your bosom to bear witness that your innocent daughter has not strayed from the path of virtue and honour."

In the twinkling of an eye the earth opens with a crash, and a matronly lady of exquisite beauty seated on a throne of gold rises from the chasm. She takes the fainting Queen of Koshala in her arms and disappears into the womb of the earth as quickly as she has come.

The scene drops over the final act of this great tragedy. A mournful sigh of emptiness blows over the universe. When will this gap be filled ? Ages will come and go, but the original that inspired Vālmiki's pen will not re-appear in another Panchavati.



III

THE EPIC CYCLE.

B—THE MAHĀBHĀRATA.



SĀVITRI.

(FIDELITY).

I

There is great rejoicing to-day in the kingdom of Madra, * for the royal heralds have just now proclaimed with a flourish of trumpets that the old king Aswapati has been blessed with a charming little daughter. Aswapati, a powerful Kshatriya prince of the Solar dynasty, though master of vast domains and suzerain lord of a hundred vassal chiefs, did not know the bliss of fatherhood. Disappointment was rankling sore in the heart of this monarch that, with all the propitiatory sacrifices he could offer, the gods did not grant him his desire. At last a *Putresthi* † sacrifice, celebrated on a very grand scale, made the gods relent, and the king got his long-looked-for reward. So, the capital city of King Aswapati

* In the modern Punjab.

† A sacrifice offered with a view to get children.

was *en fête* : she was in her holiday attire, and it was a sight for the gods to see.

II

The baby was called Sāvitri. She soon grew up a pretty little damsel, and was the delight of the royal household. Like the balm of Gilead the words she lisped brought solace to the hearts of the royal couple. She was the supreme joy of a hitherto joyless home. The old king could not do without her for a single moment : the queen would not like to send her out of her sight : so, between father and mother the girl had a very happy time of it. The king gave her the education that befitted her rank in society and birth in a Kshatriya family, and the damsel, now grown to be a tall and stately maiden, looked the right royal princess that nature and education made of her. But Sāvitri was fast approaching her age when she must be married. The king proclaimed his royal wish from end to end in his vast domains ; but, nowhere in that age of Rājput chivalry could be found an eligible husband for Sāvitri. The king grew sad ; and finding himself helpless in the matter allowed the princess full liberty in the choice of a partner in life.

III

A beautiful state-coach, drawn by four white horses with the banner of the royal house of Madra floating gaily over it, was on its way to a distant place of pilgrimage. Sāvitri and her maids, attended by the old minister of the State and a strong escort of the royal body-guard, went out of the city to carry out the mandate of the king. The fond parents blessed their daughter and wished her god-speed in the journey. The chariot flew with the speed of the wind and drove by a number of rivers, villages, hills and dales, went past many a city and many a hamlet, halted here and there, but its journey did not come to an end. People watched the procession with curious eyes ; the nobility of the countryside flocked to have a look at the youthful princess ; but the word of Sāvitri was, "Drive ahead."

At last one evening, when the departing rays of the day were vanishing fast on the distant horizon, when the cool refreshing twilight breeze was playing gently with the flowing curls of the light-hearted maiden, and the Queen of the Night was peeping through the starry casements of her royal abode by the Silver Lake in the High

Heavens, the weary procession drew up at the outskirts of a hermitage, far away from the din and bustle of luxury and wealth. It was here that the chariot halted for the night to rest.

IV

Conceive a scene of sylvan grandeur in an Elysian dale, and you will realize in part what the beauty of a hermitage meant in ancient India. It was in the hermitage that the pen of Vālmiki and Vyāsa produced, by a series of master strokes, the noblest characters that humanity could ever dream or conceive of. It was here that their genius shone in all its splendour, so that the world exclaimed approvingly, "Live now, immortal masters of Poesy and Rythm, —live in your favourite rural arbours of seclusion and everlasting peace, to be a source of inspiration for all ages and climes." It was into this spot of celestial bliss that the poet-philosopher of Germany took his excursions with his Hindu brother poet Kālidās and said in an ecstasy of delight,—“O heaven on earth, the hermitage of Indian sages !” In such a spot of wood-land beauty lived the noble King Dyumatsen of Sālwa, old, infirm, blind, expelled from his kingdom with his old consort the Queen and

their only son, Prince Satyavān, deprived of his birth-right by the cruel hands of Treason and Court Intrigue. The old king had sought out this hermitage in his exile, and while he himself was holding communion with God, the young prince was charged with the protection of the hermitage against evil-doers and the observance of the rites of hospitality to deserving guests.

V

Satyavān finding a chariot halt before the hermitage made all possible haste to make his acquaintance with the strangers. The eyes of Sāvitri met those of Satyavān, and both loved each other at first sight. Neither of them had been smitten before with the strange feeling that now took possession of their heart. It was a new experience, and the one felt irresistibly drawn towards the other. What Sāvitri could not find in cities and palaces she found here in the hut, presumably belonging to a hermit. She made up her mind. She belonged to none other than this hermit boy. And all her doubts were set at rest when she came to know afterwards that this tall youth with bearing as noble as that of Indra himself, with looks as bewitching as those of Kārtikeya, was no less a man than a

prince—the only son of King Dyumatsen in exile. She would not marry wealth with all its concomitant evils, but it was to be a union of goodness and purity with true nobility. Her pilgrimage came to an end. She had found the god of her worship and returned home from that holy shrine.

VI

To all intents and purposes the mission of the king in sending Sāvitri to the hermitage was successful, and the king, her father, was very glad that a heavy load of anxiety was lifted from his heart. It was a joyful news that the Princess had chosen for her husband one in whose veins flowed the bluest blood of Kshatriya aristocracy, the graces of whose body and mind were so favourably reported by his old minister and borne out by the unimpeachable testimony of his court heralds. That the young Prince and his father, King Dyumatsen, were living in the obscurity of poverty was in no way an obstacle to the intended marriage. Aswapati had no male issue to succeed him, and his would-be son-in-law now loomed in his eyes as the prospective heir. But, unfortunately, his joy was not destined to last long. When the announcement

was made in the king's audience chamber, who would come there but the Divine Sage Nārada, and inform the Court that the match should be avoided, for Satyavān had not a long lease of life to enjoy ! “And as sure as I am speaking,” the Sage went on, “Satyavān will be cut off by the cruel hands of Death before the twelfth moon from this day rolls in her course along the sky.” It was like a bolt from the blue ; and the bolt were a more welcome visitor than the Sage with the terrible news that upset all the plans of the unfortunate monarch.

VII

The king shuddered at the revelation made by the celestial visitor. But not so Sāvitri. She did not lose her self-possession. She had taken her resolve. Addressing the king she said, “O father, it matters little if this young prince dies at this moment or lives through eternity. The expression ‘I give’ can be uttered only once with reference to the object so given. When I have once given myself in heart to this prince, I am no longer my own mistress, and have not the right to barter myself away elsewhere for all the world. I cannot marry another man—I must wed him whom I have elected for my husband,

for it would be a great sin if I do otherwise. I should consider myself a widow even now, if you decide that I should not marry Satyavān. I have accepted him in the heart of my heart, and with him have I taken all the risk that follows.” As she spoke, her face glowed bright with the firm resolve she had taken in her heart. The old king found it was no use arguing with her. The match was settled, and the celestial Sage Nārada, finding that the Princess seemed much wiser than the head she bore on her young shoulders, departed with a blessing and a pious hope that the evil that threatened her might be averted through the timely intervention of a Power mightier than Fate.

VIII

So, on an auspicious day the marriage was celebrated in the hermitage of King Dyumatsen, and Sāvitrī renouncing the comforts and luxuries of a royal house lived in the forest like one accustomed to hardship and toil from her birth. She went there to render her husband and his parents happy in their exile, and she became the mainstay of the old royal couple to feed them, to clothe them and to cheer them in their hours of trial and tribulation. She knew the doom of

perpetual widowhood that, like the sword of Damocles, was hanging over her head, but she did not make her husband miserable by giving him the sad intelligence and making him die every hour before his actual death. She kept to herself all that she knew. In silence she suffered and sent out her heart in fervent prayers to the Almighty that the impending calamity might be averted.

IX

The months chased one another in their flight, and the year was dying out. Inexorable Fate was taking rapid strides to claim his victim, and there was only a short "morrow" between Satyavān and Death. The streaks of dawn appeared as usual over the hermitage. The refreshing morning breeze gently waved the pearl-drops that had gathered over-night on the green foliage, and waked the songsters of the vale to pour forth their merry notes into the ears of a sleeping world, but to Sāvitri they brought the heart-rending message of Doom. She rose with the first peep of the gray dawn, and with a final appeal to the throne of the Almighty she calmly resigned herself to the Inevitable Decree, fully convinced that hers would

be a conquest over Death. The sun was riding high in the blue heavens when Satyavān went out, axe in hand, to chop wood for sacrificial fire. Sāvitri would not allow him to go into the forest alone—she would keep him company up to the last moment, and beyond it. Under the pretext of seeing the wood-land scenery of the hermitage in the company of her husband, Sāvitri set out for her journey into the Land of Darkness.

X

The shades of evening were falling fast on the earth when Satyavān came down from a tree he had climbed for plucking fruits. He was unwell. With a burning thirst and an aching head he said to the poor girl, "Sāvitri, my love, I am in great pain. I do not know what the matter is with my head, but I feel as if I am dying." He rested his aching head on her knees and sank down to sleep. And he slept as if not to wake again. It was all the work of a minute. Sāvitri realized that the fateful moment had come, and Grim Death had come to snatch away from her her dearest treasure. Now a widow on earth, she was the blessed consort of her Satyavān in the embrace of eternity, the union

consecrated by death. She did not not weep : it was not the time to settle accounts. The woman with her all-conquering strength, born of chastity, came out. She now realized that the dreaded Doom had come. She gazed on the noble figure of her dear husband now sleeping the sleep of Death. Surrounded on all sides by an enveloping darkness in the centre of a frowning forest tract, clasping the remains of her dear lord in a last embrace, she challenged Death to show his might and spread his sway over her beloved. The world had vanished from her sight, and the earth had receded from her feet. The only object of which she was conscious was the cold corpse of Satyavān in the loving embrace of his true and faithful wife,—a half that was lifeless in the fond embrace of the half that was still living. She gazed on that pale and ashy face, and a superhuman strength seemed to invigorate her soul which seemed to say, “Death ! where is thy victory ?” Standing between life and death this heroic girl, strong in the strength of a true wife’s holy love, challenged the forces of the universe, and her power rose above every other power. It knew no bounds. It rose above the elements and brought water, air and the sky under its control. Sāvitri would control

Nature and Supernature. She would follow her husband into the other world and bring him back to life. Her resolve was taken, and she waited future developments.

XI

Sāvitri was calm and immovable like a rock. She was in a trance. She knew not how long she would have to remain so, when a very clear voice rang through the firmament, and she heard the words, "Grieve not, my child. This is Destiny, and none can withstand it. Leave your husband whose soul now belongs to me of right. I relent not. I strike when the hour arrives, and I strike an unerring blow. I have come to claim my due. Give it up, daughter of the mortals, and go home." Death himself dreaded to come too near her. Sāvitri looked up and saw before her the god of Death. She gave up the lifeless corpse, but home she would not go. She followed the walking figure that was taking away the soul of Satyavān. The god, hearing the sound of foot-steps following, wondered what the matter could be. He looked back and finding Sāvitri in his track said, "Brave girl, I am not accustomed to such conduct. Your devotion to your dead husband pleases me highly. Ask a

favour save and except the life of your husband, and it shall be granted." Sāvitri now spoke. She said, "Then grant me, O Lord of Death, that my father who has no son to solace him at this fag end of life may have one who will live to perpetuate his illustrious line." "Granted, my child," said the god, "but you must not follow me any longer. Go home directly." "I have no home," replied the undaunted girl, "I know of no home except where my husband is. You cannot separate me from my self. The true wife follows her husband through poverty, sickness and death. You know, omniscient lord, that Sāvitri has desired nothing but union with her husband. Even the god of Death cannot separate her from her husband."

"You are an ideal wife, Sāvitri. But you must know that Fate is stronger than everything else. Your husband was fated to die on this day. So your devotion, unearthly as it is, could not alter that inexorable decree. But I am greatly pleased at the extraordinary loyalty you have shown to your husband. Ask another boon and be satisfied. I have told you, I can deny you nothing but the life of your husband."

"If you are pleased, O dread Lord of the dead," replied Sāvitri quietly, "then restore

to my father-in-law his lost sight and kingdom."

"It shall be as you desire. Now leave me, and do not stand further in my way."

So saying the god sped on. He thought of the beautiful mortal child, and the sorrow that the death of Satyavān had caused to his wife and his unfortunate aged parents ; but he consoled himself with the thought that he was merely executing the doom of Fate Inevitable. Out of curiosity, he looked back to see if the girl had been disposed of, but lo ! Sāvitri was at his heels. What was it ? How could a living mortal cross the boundaries of the regions of Death ? The god halted once again, and said, "Sāvitri, you must stop. You are now on the borders of the realm of Death." "To be plain, O god, I am resolved to come home, that is, to my husband. If I must not ask you to restore him to me, I can at least pray that you will be pleased to take me to where my dear lord goes. I did not undertake to cease to follow him."

Death was in a nice fix. He was the lord of the dead, but he could not admit the living into his realm.

"You must not come any further." The spirits of the dead I accommodate, but I have

nothing to do with the living. Your time has not yet come. I cannot admit you into these regions. Ask a third boon which I will grant you readily, and then go home to your relations like a good girl that you are."

This was the last opportunity of Sāvitri, and she resolved to make the most of it. She said, "O kind god, it is in the holy books that a childless mortal cannot enter heaven. Grant me, if you are so pleased, that I may have a number of children to perpetuate the line of my father-in-law. Believe me, I will not trouble you any more."

The Lord of Death was pleased at the prospect of being let alone. He granted her the last prayer also and hurried on. The devoted girl put herself athwart the path of the terrible dispenser of justice.

"Restore my husband to me."

"This is what I do not like," frowned the god, "one step more will make me chide you, girl. Be reasonable and leave me. I have granted all the boons you asked for."

"I am not the least unreasonable in my demand," replied Sāvitri without any sign of fear, "how can your last boon be fulfilled unless you agree to give me back my husband? You hold

the scales even between truth and falsehood. Can a god go back upon the pledge he has given?" Death saw how he was entrapped and readily acknowledged his defeat. He gave back the life of Satyavān, so that the chaste wife's love and devotion to her husband might be valued higher than any other power on earth.

XII

Satyavān came back to life. The hermit Dyumatsen had his lost sight and kingdom restored to him. King Aswapati was glad to have an heir, and Sāvitri was blessed with a numerous progeny.

They lived a long life of happiness and prosperity, and Sāvitri still inspires Indian womanhood with her bright example of chastity and devotion. Long afterwards this ideal was held up again in a European country, and on the shores of Hellespont burnt this purifying flame in the life-story of Laodamia.

GĀNDHĀRI.*

(RIGHTEOUSNESS).

I

In ancient Gāndhāra†, to the west of India, grew the pretty little damsel Gāndhāri, only daughter of King Subala. She had a brother, the young Prince Shakuni, cruel, crafty and sinful,—a striking contrast to the sister, in person, habits and temperament. Little did the royal children know, when they played together in the gardens adjoining the lofty mansions, that they were destined to leave their mark on the history of an empire, the princess as an ideal of righteousness, and young Shakuni as a force of evil, a man of villainy and dark design.

In course of time the little princess was betrothed to Dhritarāshtra of the royal house of

* Culled from the Great Epic, the Mahābhārata (edited by Late Kaliprasanna Sinha).

† The site of ancient Gāndhāra is identified with modern Kāndāhār.

Hastināpur. Dhritarāshtra, albeit a powerful monarch, was blind from his birth ; but when this unpleasant news reached the ears of the beautiful bride, she did not pine away in silent grief. Rather, she was thankful to the gods for the good fortune they had sent her, and prayed fervently that she might prove a dutiful and loving wife to her husband. Not desiring to enjoy the sights of Nature, an experience denied to her betrothed lord, she tightly bandaged up her eyes so that the world might become a blank to her. The sun, the moon and the stars must not shine for her, for the lord of her heart was in perpetual gloom. Then the beautiful maiden came to Hastināpur to take her rightful place by the side of the blind king, and make the most virtuous wife that ever loved a husband.

II

Years rolled by. The young queen of Dhritarāshtra, now mother of a numerous family of children, was the delight of her husband and the pride of the royal household. But her sons, the Kauravas, unfortunately grew up wicked and guileful. They were envious of their cousins, the Pāndavas. A younger branch than the Kauravas themselves, they were co-sharers of

the vast territories enjoyed by King Dhritarāshtra. Duryyodhana, the eldest Kuru prince, had his maternal uncle Shakuni for his guide ; so, he grew up in the ways of avarice and impiety, wishing to wrest the rightful share of his cousins. Both uncle and nephew laid their heads together for removing all obstacles from the path of ambition.

Their diabolical schemes did not easily succeed. The cousins, though terribly persecuted, escaped unhurt from all their designs upon their lives ; it was a sad disappointment to Duryyodhana that they could not as yet be disposed of by means fair or foul. They were moreover, gaining in strength and popularity. Their capital, Indraprastha, overlooking the blue waters of the Jamunā wore a festive appearance in view of the Rājasuya sacrifice * they decided to perform.

Monarchs came from all corners of India and hailed the pious Yudhisthira, the eldest Pāndava, as over-lord. But the Kurus were consumed with envy, and Duryyodhana plotted the downfall of his kinsmen. Prince Shakuni, evil genius of the Kuru line, suggested that a challenge

* A ceremony to mark the assumption of imperial dignity by one king over all other kings.

should be sent to Yudhisthira to come to Hastināpur and gamble with the dice. Foolish as it was to gamble, the Pāndavas felt it to be a point of honour to take up the challenge. So, the Pāndu King with mother, brothers and Queen Draupadi went to Hastināpur to try his chance.

III

In the audience hall of Hastināpur, with its walls bedecked with gems, its windows hung with curtains of netted gold, its floor covered with the richest carpet, sat the princes and nobles amidst luxury on all sides. The dicing commenced. The old king Dhritarāshtra was there with his whole Court to watch the game. The Prince of Gāndhāra who played for Duryyodhana was an unprincipled gambler and played foul; so Yudhisthira lost throw after throw, and stake after stake. He lost his jewels and diamonds, his horses and elephants, his kingdom, brothers and himself. But the passion of gambling was up in him, and the game proceeded, till he had the folly to stake his wife, his sole remaining possession. It was all over. He lost the throw,—and the Imperial family of Indraprastha became bond-slaves of Duryyodhana.

IV

The eldest Kaurava, after all, had gained his cherished desire. Without waiting for another moment he beckoned to his younger brother Duhshāsan who hurried into the ladies' chambers where Queen Draupadi was waiting in breathless suspense. The queen recoiled at the sight of the villain. Her heart throbbed, her head ached, her cheeks grew ashy pale. But before she could think of escaping, the cruel messenger of Duryyodhana had caught her by the curls of her flowing hair and dragged her screaming into the audience hall.

Draupadi shook in fright. She sent the anguish of her soul in a heart-rending appeal to the assembled Kshatriya Knights, but though the elders bit their tongues and frowned from their places at the indignities heaped upon the helpless lady, they knew that Duryyodhana was relentless ; so they looked on in gloomy silence. The Pāndus, now bond-slaves of the Kauravas, and promise-bound not to interfere, had not the freedom to act. They lowered their eyes and lookèd the picture of sullen indignation. Oh that they were free !

In a moment of madness that wicked Duryyodhana dragged the princess nearer and returned her protestations with a kick. He courted the annihilation of his family and race by perpetrating this horrible outrage. The elders shaded their eyes with their hands and the lights grew dim in the chamber, as if Agni, the god of fire, blushed with shame at the sight. Owls screeched, jackals wailed and ravens croaked mournfully at the distress of the queen. However, the sacrilege was done, and repentance did not visit the wicked heart of Duryyodhana.

V

But the piteous wails of Draupadi reached the ears of Queen Gāndhārī and sent a thrill of shudder through her frame. What fresh villainy her sons were about! She hurried into the presence of the blind king and took in the situation at a glance. The outraged Queen of Indraprastha stood erect before the assembly, white with rage and ready to pronounce a curse. The elders of the council, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others were shedding tears over the scene they had just witnessed. The Pāndus sat humiliated, as if lost to all sensation. The old king Dhritarāshtra could not see,—but his ears

were sharp enough to notice the subdued whispers passing through the assembly.

Queen Gāndhāri approached the blind king and said, "My lord, King of Hastināpur, it is Gāndhāri that speaks, Gāndhāri, your Queen, who curses the moment she bore her sons. Am I to understand, my lord, that the shameful deed was done before the King of the land, solemnly charged by Heaven with the protection of the oppressed? Were your arms too paralysed to move your weapon in the defence of a helpless woman? The monarch of the Kuru race must have ceased caring for justice, or I would certainly have wailed over the corpse of that wayward son of ours at this moment. Rather disown that black sheep of our family, my lord, than connive at this impious deed. The omens outside forebode the extinction of the whole race for the sin of one. I implore you, my King, if it is not too late, to propitiate insulted virtue that the coming doom may yet be averted."

The blind king trembled at the words of his queen, and dreading the vengeance of outraged modesty allowed himself to be led to where the insulted lady stood. Repenting the sinful deed of his son he humbly asked her forgiveness, and made some reparation by setting the Pāndus free

from their bondage. The Pāndava brothers with their mother and wife were allowed to depart as free men and women.

Draupadi shed tears of gratitude at the intercession of Gāndhāri who fought for justice and righteousness.

VI

After thirteen years of perilous wanderings in various disguises, the Pāndavas returned and wanted only five villages from their cousin of Hastināpur, one for each brother to settle in. They would forget the past, and live as friends and kinsmen. But Duryyodhana turned a deaf ear to their entreaties. Poor old Dhritarāshtra counselled peace, but the messenger of the Pāndavas returned with an insolent reply. Duryyodhana's jealousy continued unabated, and the negotiations were about to fail.

Queen Gāndhāri was sent for at this juncture to intercede on behalf of the Pāndavas. She appeared once more in the Council hall, and put forth a vigorous plea for peace with the persecuted kinsmen.

“Mind ye, my wayward child,” said the virtuous mother of the black-hearted Duryyodhana, “mind ye, that a kingdom cannot be gained or

enjoyed at your sweet will. He who has no control over his self, cannot enjoy a kingdom for any length of time; the great man who has acquired mastery over his passions can lord it over the earth. Greed and anger lead you to the paths of unrighteousness; conquer these vile propensities, and you conquer the world.

“War does not bring any good in its train; victory is uncertain. So, my boy, do not rush headlong into war. Half of the kingdom is sufficient for you. Give the other half to your cousins whose claim to it is as good as yours.

“The premeditated campaign of persecution you have led against the Pāndavas for thirteen long years loudly calls for reparation. Listen to your mother’s advice, young man, that you may not offend your sincere friends and elders who will grow to like the virtuous Pāndavas, and hate you for your impiety.

“Verily I tell you, my son, it is virtue, that triumphs in the long run, and impiety falls as sure as the sun rises in the east. Ask your own heart, my son, and judge whether your cousins really deserve a more humane treatment from you.

“Rest assured, my boy, I will never sanction this unholy fratricidal war. Do not, in your

impious avarice for power and territory, bring ruin upon the Kuru line. Let not your black design be the root cause of the doom of the world.

“Gall and wormwood though my words be to you, the truth must be told, the plain and unvarnished truth, even if it offends you, my son, whom I suckled on my breast. Do not be blind to the folly of your ways, and, for once, do what is right and just.”

Queen Gāndhāri spoke. But the eyes of the dark-browed Duryyodhana flashed forth anger at the words. He frothed and foamed, and left the council chamber, hurling defiance at father, mother and the elders of the kingdom.

VII

They fought the battle on the plains of Kurukshetra, and Right triumphed over Might. Whenever Duryyodhana asked a blessing from his mother during the days the battle raged, her invariable reply was, “Know, my child, that victory ever attendeth the cause of Right.” The Kaurava hosts were slain, the Chiefs all killed, and the Kuru race annihilated. The most terrible war in the annals of Epic India closed in the destruction of all that was evil and

impious. The memorable words of Gāndhāri “*Yato dharmah tato jayah*”* inaugurated the kingdom of righteousness, and are still ringing through the length and breadth of India, living through three thousand years.

VIII

This short notice has proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the father may give way to weakness, but not the mother of the type of Queen Gāndhāri of the Mahābhārata. Impelled by the sense of duty and right she tried to dissuade her son from the course of impiety he was running. Her protests were strong, her words very often caustic; but she did not fear the consequence, and told the unpalatable truth to uphold the cause of justice. This has made her immortal in the history of the famous women of India, but Duryyodhana shut his eyes to reason and right, flouted his mother's good counsel and atoned for his sin with the life of his race.

* Victory ever attendeth the cause of Right.

THE HISTORIC CYCLE.

A—ANCIENT.



GOPĀ*.

(RENUNCIATION).

I

If India, the cradle of many famous religions, has made a spiritual conquest of the world, it is due to the superhuman personality of some extraordinary characters, Buddha, Sankarāchāryya, Gourānga, Vivekānanda and a host of other religious reformers whom people have unhesitatingly called '*Avatārs*' or Incarnations of the Deity. But, if there were great apostles to tell us of higher things, and unfold purer visions, there were great women too, in this country, who worked devotedly for the propagation of the truth. The renunciation and religious devotion of these women have been one of the factors to

*For the materials of this sketch I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to the articles 'Buddha' and 'Gopā' contributed to the columns of the comprehensive Bengali Dictionary compiled by Mr. S. C. Mittra and published by the N. B Press, Calcutta, (1912). •

raise India so high in the spiritual estimate of the world.

In a subsequent narrative an attempt will be made to say something about the great Lord Buddha and his religious brotherhood. It is intended to show in the present short sketch how Buddhism owed to some lady workers for its initial success. We have heard of the various lady saints of Europe,—St. Theresa, St. Cecilia, and a number of great ladies who were canonised after their death. It is only in the fitness of things that we should also have some knowledge of the life of the great Indian lady, Princess Gopā, whose active help smoothed the way for the vigorous propagation of the great religious system of her husband.

II

About 550 years before the birth of Christ, Princess Gopā was born to a Kshatriya chief reigning over the small principality named Koli, near Kapilavāstu at the foot of the Himālayas in North-West Behar. King Dandapāni, the father of the girl, traced his descent from the ancient Solar dynasty of Northern India. He was connected, moreover, with the royal house of Kapilavāstu, a more extensive and powerful

Kshatriya kingdom to its west. King Dandapāni brought up his beautiful daughter in a manner befitting a Kshatriya girl of ancient India. He therefore believed, and not without reason, that he could marry his daughter well, when the time would come. So years went by, and Gopā grew up in the graces of her person and mind.

III

Prince Siddhārtha, only son of King Suddhodana of Kapilavāstu, was giving away the *Asokavanda** with a view to the selection of a wife. Maidens attended from far and near, and were honoured by the Prince with a valuable present; so the number of the ceremonial cups was exhausted. Last came Gopā, daughter of Dandapāni, to honour the invitation. Introduced to the Prince, the shy little maiden enquired appealingly, “Am I alone, O Prince of Kapilavāstu, to be deprived of the honour of a friendly present, because I come too late?”

* Literally, a cup of lasting friendship and good will. It appears that in Ancient India, somewhere between 30 and 40 centuries back, when Kshatriya supremacy was firmly established in the country, a custom prevailed among the princes of the Knightly caste to invite maidens of royal and noble families to a ceremonial rite preliminary to marriage. Such of the maidens as attended received the present of an ornamental golden cup from the hands of the would-be bridegroom as a token of regard, and one at least of the maidens would receive his special attentions. The custom corresponded to the Swayamvara ceremony held on behalf of a Kshatriya princess of Ancient India.

Siddhārtha was in a fix. The presents were all gone, but how could he send away the little lady empty-handed,—of all maidens this, who deserved the honour most, being his relation and and the best of the lot that came? Her appealing looks had almost conquered his heart.

Instantly the Prince took off a diamond ring from his finger, and coming up to the royal maiden, said, “Last of all, Princess, but you are not the least in my estimation. The cups are gone, but not the regard for my beautiful kinswoman. Accept this humble gift from a friend, I pray, as a memento of this eventful day.”—So saying, he put the ring round her finger; and Gopā gratefully accepted this token of sincere friendship. If she had the wish, she might know that the Prince had given her his heart with the ring.

IV

On hearing that Siddhārtha was more interested in Princess Gopā than the rest of the maidens, King Suddhodana sent a messenger to the Chief of Koli, telling him of the choice of the Prince of Kapilavāstu. But Dandapāni knew that Siddhārtha was, from his childhood, more inclined to pray than to fight. So he did not

welcome the proposal, and the messenger returned with the reply that the Prince of Kapilavāstu should prove himself a true Kshatriya Knight before he could hope to win his bride. Siddhārtha took the challenge of Dandapāni in a very charitable spirit, and remembering that he was more a priest than a soldier, took to military exercises with greater zeal than ever. In a couple of years he became the most skilful archer in the country-side,—and none could surpass him in wrestling, riding and fencing. He acquired the arts with a marvellous rapidity, and his fame spread throughout the country. Dandapāni congratulated himself on his fortune, when he gave away his daughter to Prince Siddhārtha, a Knight among Knights, the most splendid warrior-prince of the Sākya tribe.

V

It was a life of blissful enjoyment for Gopā. She had the priceless treasure of a husband's love, an inexhaustible fund of parental affection in her new home, the admiration of friends and relations, and all the comforts that a royal household could procure. A young lady could desire nothing more. But she was not destined to

enjoy the comforts of the world for a long time.

It is a matter of history that Prince Siddhārtha was a man of contemplation, and though to please his father he had agreed to marry and live as the future heir to a king's throne, he could not defy his inner self which asserted itself about this time. Though luxury ministered to the comforts of the Crown-Prince of a kingdom, Siddhārtha relapsed into his pensive silence, and gave himself up to meditation. His spirit wanted to break the bars of the palace which was like a cage to him. He wanted to free himself and mankind from the miseries of the world by discovering the way to salvation. So, when a son was born to him, fearing lest the fresh tie should bind him closer to its vanities, he renounced the world and became a *Yogi*. Gopā awoke from her dream of bliss.

VI

Leaving Prince Siddhārtha to his wanderings in the country, in quest of the Highest Truth, we follow the course of Gopā's life in the royal family of Kapilavāstu. She was not an ordinary woman as her husband was not an ordinary man. She was a loyal wife and a helpmate of

her husband in the true sense of the word. She would do nothing to throw an obstacle in the way of her husband's exalted mission in life. So she resolved to play her part. Thus, while the palace was in mourning at the renunciation of the Prince, and old Suddhodana and his royal consort were pining away in grief, the young bride gave up her queenly robes, shunned luxury as poison and began to live the life of strict asceticism. The old King and Queen tried hard to make her change her resolve. But Gopā was firm. "The wife of a prince, I *was* a princess, mother," she thus met the expostulations of Devi Goutami, her mother-in-law, "but now the wife of a mendicant, it behoves me, mother, that I should be a mendicant, too. It is only for the sake of the baby," she continued, "that I must not leave this home. I am simply doing what a loyal and worthy wife should do when similarly placed. Opposition will only crush the life out of me, by slow degrees, but not the loyal spirit that impels me to this step." Opposition was silenced, and young Gopā, banishing all vanity from her heart and renouncing every comfort that she might easily secure, retired into the seclusion of monasticism in the palace chambers of Kapilāvastu.

VII

Months rolled into years, and the years swelled into a decade, but Gopā never wavered in her resolve. Her frame was worn to a skeleton, her dress like that of the poorest beggar-maid, her life regulated in the ways of piety and good-will to mankind. She held communion with the master minds of old, and her life became essentially a life of self-culture. She thought of her lord not, indeed, as a young wife would think of her absent husband, but as every other woman would think of the Saviour of mankind.

While Gopā was passing her time as a solitary recluse, waiting for the auspicious day of her final emancipation, the wandering Prince discovered the way to Salvation. Having attained the true knowledge he became the holy Buddha or "the Enlightened One." He brought his message of Hope and Love to suffering humanity : it appealed to the masses and claimed converts by thousands and tens of thousands. In the course of his itineracy he visited Kapilavāstu, the dear old place where King Suddhodana, now far advanced in years, bent under the weight of a very heavy sorrow,

was still doing his duty as the protector of his people.

News reached the king that the Enlightened One was on his way to the city. People flocked to hear him preach and to receive a blessing from him. Men assembled in the parks and promenades, and the women and children took their places on the flats and terraces of their houses. The city was on the tiptoe of expectation.

VIII

The Lord Buddha was preaching in the streets of Kapilavāstu. Clad in the rags of the poorest mendicant, with the pilgrim's staff in his hand, humbler than the humblest of God's creation, the whilom Prince of Kapilavāstu was slowly wending his way through the crowd. His eyes shed a soft radiance around, his words dropped ambrosia. He told of a purer life, a life of love and truth and holiness,—and of the end of human miseries—no sorrow, no disease, no distinction between prince and peasant, between man and man,—no death but *Nirvāna* or the final emancipation of the Soul. They heard him with rapt attention.

Budha came to the palace at the invitation of King Suddhodana. It was a moment of trial

for Gopā. For ten long years she had cherished the memory of the wandering Prince and worshipped his image in her heart. The poor wife had longed for the return of her husband, and he returned, not as the gallant Kshatriya youth of ten years back, but as the holiest hermit in the land with his message of Salvation. She did not appear before the Lord, lest her sight should come between the husband and the Saviour of mankind. She sacrificed the woman to duty. Rising far beyond the weakness of the flesh, Gopā stood towering above the women of the world.

From the terrace of the lonely retreat, where Gopā was spending her days in austere asceticism, she saw the radiant figure of the Messenger of Salvation. Her heart went out in a silent offering of homage and devotion. She bowed down her head and turned back her eyes. It was a beatific vision, and the woman of the world was not yet fit to enjoy more than a glimpse of it.

She sent on the young boy Rāhula to ask a blessing of the father. Buddha took the child in his arms and gave him the father's legacy. The child was blessed with the holy touch, and the Lord breathed into his ears the mystic words, —“Contemplation, Purity and Love.”

IX

Some more years passed, and Gopā was bidding her time. She was living a life of service and poverty. She learnt to hold the sacredness of life as the first of human concerns. She realized that there was joy in loving and serving other selves than her own, and that the secret of true happiness lay, not in the spirit being cribbed and confined, but in being helped to grow and expand and embrace the meanest of God's creation. Gopā was gradually moving towards the goal of regeneration.

The old king Suddhodana was no more in the land of the living, and Buddha once more visited Kapilavāstu. The citizens flocked again to hear him preach the great truth that had by this time spread from province to province. They accepted his religion.

The ladies of the royal household were all converted. Buddha saw that Gopā had virtually renounced the world shortly after he had left. An eager desire had taken possession of her heart to serve mankind through Charity and Love. So, Buddha created an Order of Nuns, called *Bhikshunis*, and Gopā was placed at the head of this Sisterhood to help at the propagation of the new religion.

X

The life of Gopā as a Sister of the Buddhist 'Order of Charity' was one of calm contemplation and active sympathy with suffering humanity. In the sacred cloisters of the Buddhist Monastery, Gopā was an inspiration to many others who devoted their lives to the holy cause. Her humility, toleration, unselfish devotion to duty and her sincere endeavour to raise fallen humanity were object lessons to her co-workers. That the religion of Buddha made such a rapid headway in the land was primarily due to the missionary spirit of the great men and women whose renunciation will live in history, though the religion may show signs of decline, as every human institution is bound to do in course of ages; and Gopā's renunciation will ever draw the most appreciative recognition from every student of Buddhistic history in the world.

SUPRIYĀ.*

(PHILANTHROPY).

I

It is a little story about a great soul, a soul that has passed away, but has left behind its sweetness to endure. Supriyā, the Sister of Mercy, lived with the Great Master in an age the memory of which is fast vanishing from our minds, a dim and distant past, long before modern culture saw the light of day. But the story of her philanthropy is yet recalled with a glow of pride by the student of the Buddhist age of Indian history.

II

To know something of this lady of pious memory let us know a bit of the exalted mission of Lord Buddha whose advent in the history of the world is a wonderful phenomenon. Born

* Based on the poem "Nagara-Lakshmi" by Sir Rabindranath Tagore.

a Prince and bred in the lap of luxury and wealth, Goutama renounced the world and its pleasures, and moved by the miseries of man he devoted himself to the discovery of the way to what he regarded as Salvation. *Nirvāna* or the Buddhist Salvation is a mystery incomprehensible to the ordinary human intellect: but the fact stands out clear that it was a glorious call of unbounded Love, a surging wave of universal brotherhood that issued forth from a boundless spirit tearing the shackles of colour, caste and creed, ready to embrace the meanest form of animal life in God's creation.

III

So, the great gospel of Fraternity, Equality and Love was expounded by the Enlightened One in India at the foot of the famous Bodhi tree in a glorious age of a by-gone past, and a group of devoted workers responded to this call of duty and love, and gathered round the Great Master to carry his loving message of Salvation to the door of suffering humanity. They formed the famous order of Buddhist *Bhikshus* and *Bhikshunis*, vowed to lifelong celibacy and poverty, and consecrating their lives to charity in the widest application of the word. Thus the

student of Buddhist India finds the illustrious names of Sujātā, Vishākhā, Supriyā, Sanghamitrā and many more noble spirits who wept and worked for afflicted mankind. Sister Supriyā was the daughter of a favourite disciple of Lord Buddha, Chittradatta by name.

IV

Chittradatta was originally a merchant of substance in the ancient city of Vaishālī in what is now known as North Behar. At middle age he came under the irresistible influence of the lofty tenets of Lord Goutama, and renounced the pleasures of the world in favour of the austere life of a Buddhist monk. The whole of his savings amounting to forty *lakhs* of gold pieces went to the poor as their share. The Buddhist Council of Elders, or *Sangha* as it was called, embraced Chittradatta with open arms, and gave him the distinctive appellation, *Anāthpindada*,* for this act of unprecedented liberality. The merchant prince, now turned into a begging mendicant among the followers of Buddha, became the main pillar of the infant catholic church of ancient India. In his excessive zeal for the propagation of the new religion the Bhikshu,

* A giver of bread to the helpless.

when he left home for the monastery, could make no better provision for his daughter Supriyā than by leaving her to shift for herself in this wide world. This is nothing to wonder at : our great Sannyasi Teachers, Lord Buddha and Lord Gourānga, renounced their immediate world in almost similar circumstances : the whole world was their family and they could not love a part without loving the whole.

V

The girl, however, did not lose heart at this sudden change of fortune. The weight of her grief could not crush her. Though she was abandoned by her only surviving parent, she did not find fault with him whom she adored as an object of worship. She realized that the home of her father was now the greater world beyond the city of Vaishālī, and that he was summoned to a sphere of duty larger in its scope and loftier in its nature than mere speculations on profit and loss. Some of the great apostles of the Buddhist faith constantly visited her house before her father's conversion, and thrown into their contact she was not slow to realise that a great religious upheaval was taking place in India, and sooner or later, she would be carried away

by that irresistible current. She was, therefore, prepared in a way for what was coming and was simply biding her time.

VI

Supriyā could boast of a rare combination of beauty, youth and culture, and deprived as she was of her rightful inheritance as the only child of her father, she was yet courted for her sterling qualities by many a handsome young suitor of the day. But the attractions of the world could not lead her to it. She was very early impressed with the transitoriness of worldly pleasures and the lofty ideals of monastic life. The wails of suffering humanity, the fruit of human actions, the miseries of birth and re-birth,—all these made an indelible impression on her mind, and the renunciation of her father very naturally spurred her on in the way of her religious inclinations. While her wooers whispered softly into her ears the music of a dream land of poetry and romance, Supriyā was listening instead to the piteous moans of her afflicted brethren who stood in need of consolation and relief. While her maids tried to deck her out prettily in a rich garb of costly jewels against her wedding day, Supriyā slowly lifted the curtain that opened

before her compassionate gaze the land of the errors, follies and miseries of man. So, she took her resolve, and while the city was eagerly waiting to join the wedding feast of Chittradatta's daughter, she left her home one night, and unsuspecting Vaishāli did not know what became of the bride.

VII

Years went by and two decades of Lord Buddha's appeal to the religious consciousness of India brought in a rich harvest of peaceful progress in his glorious mission of philanthropy. Buddhism got hold of the better mind of the classes and masses in India, and made a very rapid headway into the inmost recesses of the Indian home. The faith preached by Sākya Muni was now the accepted religion in Upper India, and the missionary spirit which contributed so largely to its success, brought forth a host of Friars and Sisters who had shaped their lives in the image of the Lord. They followed the Master wherever his work called him away.

VIII

Once there was a great famine at Srāvastipur, a flourishing district at the foot of the Himalayas in North Bengal. Two consecutive

years of drought caused a failure of the staple food grain of the country. The fury of a tropical sun drank dry the streams and pools of water, and the proverbial breeze of an Indian spring could not breathe a tinge of green on the withered foliage of a once-smiling landscape. There was a wail of distress all round the country, and every home felt the pinch of hunger and thirst. The beggar was turned away empty-handed by the liveried footmen at the gates of the rich. The ever bountiful mother's breast could not supply a drop of drink,—nay, her eyes withheld a drop of tear that might moisten the parched lips of the dying baby in her arms. The death-roll increased from day to day and the dying agonies reached the ears of Lord Buddha and his Nursing Brotherhood.

IX

The heart of the Lord bled for the starving and dying millions of Srāvastipur. It was a sacred call of duty, love and sacrifice,—it was a call of the religion that he preached. With the tender solicitude of the loving mother, Buddha hastened to the city with some of his most devoted followers, and, deeply moved by the

heart-rending sight of distress, he immediately summoned his disciples to meet him at a Council outside the city gates. They obeyed the mandate of the Lord. They attended the call, from the richest of the city to the poorest, whose tearful eyes were fixed in a supplicating gaze upon the face of their Saviour. The Lord made an impassioned appeal to the benevolent instinct of each of his disciples. "Followers of the Religion of Love, who is there among you that weeps for suffering humanity? Who is there among you, my beloved disciples, that will volunteer his services to give bread to the hungry? If you have tasted a mouthful while hunger has killed a brother, if your lips have touched a delicious drink while thirst has stuck the tongue of your dying neighbour to the roof of his mouth, if you have fed and clothed your children while my helpless darlings have cried for food in vain,—then I may as well tell you that Buddhism has fallen upon barren soil, and Buddha has cried in the wilderness for all these years. Who among my numerous followers will come forward to do his duty as man to man?" The voice died away,—but the eyes of the Lord sparkled with the fire of enthusiasm. He stopped for a response.

X

But the appeal fell flat on the ears of the millionaires of Srāvastipur. The sight of distress and death could not move their stony hearts, far less could the appeal in words, couched as it was in the eloquent language of no ordinary pathos. No response came from the vast gathering,—there was only a slight attempt at excuses. *Dharmānkura*, the famous jeweller of the city, hung down his head, lest the enquiring gaze of the Master should confront his eyes. *Mādhava Sena*, the Engineer-Contractor, was out at elbows just at present after spending all his surplus wealth in celebrating his daughter's marriage. *Rājā Rām*, owner of vast estates, said he was in arrears to the landlord for his rent,—his fields were dry and his pastures, like deserts. *Suvadatta*, the Kāyastha Banker and Money-lender, had his business very dull in the year, and was just thinking of closing down. *Rādhā-gupta*, the timber merchant, feared he would have to wind up as building materials were going out of demand from month to month,—and all for the cursed famine that held the country firm in its grip. They said they had little to support themselves with and less to spare. They would

have been glad to loosen their purse-strings, if these were strong enough to bear the weight. But, as ill-luck would have it, they were short of money,—they were hard hit—sorely pressed—impoverished, and what not? They were telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in that they could not make both ends meet. Or, by *Bodhisattva*, the mandate of the Lord would.....". There was an exchange of significant glances in the assembly.

XI

The Lord would not hear any more of this unblushing falsehood. He knew that impudence could go no further. He realized that insincerity had done its worst, and that selfishness had worked its way into the hearts of the rich people of Srāvastipur and blinded them to their best interests. He was disgusted at heart, but he did not hate them. He did not curse his own flock that had gone astray,—he only pitied them. With the pain at his heart that gathered at the corner of his eyes, he looked here, there and everywhere for a soul that was above the sordidness of the world, a soul that was ready to take the whole world in its compassionate embrace, a soul that dropped a tear for all that

wept. But there was not a flutter ; no body stirred. Then Lord Goutama turned towards his immediate followers, the Servants of Charity,—and lo ! a timid woman in the rags of a Buddhist nun, a Sister of Mercy, about forty years of age, stood up slowly on her legs. She approached the Benign Presence, and kissing the hem of his holy garment said in a voice tremulous with emotion,—“Victory be to the mandate of the Enlightened One. It is I, Supriyā, the meanest of your daughters, that will do the bidding of the Lord. I take the charge of feeding the hungry millions of Srāvastipur. I wait the pleasure of the Lord.” Tears were running down her cheeks, and her sobs showed how she was affected.

XII

Nothing could be bolder than the announcement of Sister Supriyā, nothing more preposterous to set the whole assembly wondering.

“Mark the boasting braggart”, muttered Dharmāpāl, “what can there be in her beggar’s rags ?”

“She must be off her head,” commented Rādhāgupta, “to undertake this gigantic task.”

“How dare you, Sister of the Holy Order of Charity”, put in Suvadatta, the banker, “how

dare you, woman, save a doomed district, when the richest find their means insufficient? Your coffers must be uncommonly large for a charity of this kind, or your wits must have gone woolgathering."

Supriyā heard the comments. She bowed to the very respectable gathering of the rich, and said, "My brethren, there is more in my beggar's bowl than you can possibly imagine. It will go begging from door to door and will come back filled with your charity. It will draw on the perpetual fountain of your kindness, and like the "gentle rain" it will moisten the parched City yonder."

The assembly heard her reply in mute wonder. Buddha blessed her again and again and prayed she might have strength enough to stand the test.

XIII

So, Sister Supriyā, the once beautiful daughter of Chitradatta of Vaishālī, now a member of the Holy Order of the Buddhist Sisterhood, found the work for which she was destined from her birth. The whole Society of the Servants of Charity worked with her wholeheartedly in organising a house-to-house collec-

tion of alms, and the movement gained volume and strength from day to day. The rich now seeing the folly of their ways could not refuse the appeal of the self-sacrificing Friars and Sisters, and in a month's time the relief was so well-organised that the starving population of the district had food in plenty to eat and cloth to wear. Sister Supriyā as the soul of the movement visited every hut and every hamlet, brought comfort to the door of the sick and helpless, and having worked there till the return of the next harvest, moved to another sphere of her activities where she might be useful in alleviating human misery.

The teachings of Buddha did not fall upon barren soil. The call of mercy has ever been a call of duty in India, and Buddha or Chaitanya, the preacher of Love to mankind, has reaped here a full harvest for his glorious call of service to humanity.

IV. THE HISTORIC CYCLE.
B—MEDIEVAL.



BĀKPUSHTĀ.

(BENEVOLENCE).

I

Once in the far-off past that carries our readers back to the palmy days of Hindu supremacy in medieval India, there reigned in Cāshmere a very noble-minded Kshatryia Prince, Toonjina by name. Cāshmere, the delightful grove of the entire Himalayan regions, a veritable paradise on earth, was yet a Hindu principality, teeming with green meadows, pleasant valleys, rich pastures and flourishing villages with hardy warrior tribes that could easily hold their own against any foreign aggression.

In such a country reigned the very popular Prince Toonjina noted alike for chivalry, generosity and charity, and his throne was shared by his beautiful consort, Princess Bākpushtā, a queen among queens, a mother to her subjects

and the most prominent figure in the council chamber of the kingdom.

II

Now it so happened that when the harvests were ready to be gathered and the peasants were in eager anticipation of their long-looked-for holiday, September came with a chilling frost that destroyed all the crops of the country. It was like a bolt from the blue that smote the peasant and his lord with the same violence and rendered the country bereft of a vestige of vegetation. A terrible famine followed in its wake and devastated the country. The gaunt figure of Monster Famine stalked with long and rapid strides in the land from end to end, and claimed his toll every day by hundreds and thousands. Men, women and children died of starvation in their hundreds and thousands, and it was really a lamentable sight to see the mother snatching away the mouthful from her children's hands, husband tearing at a handful of *jowar*, at which his famished wife had long been looking with wistful eyes,—and many more dreadful things which create a revulsion of feeling in the human heart. Death made no distinction between the rich and the poor and

was particularly cruel to the suckling baby. Cāshmere, the home of beauty and plenty, became a long, long charnel house.

III

The wails of the people reached the ears of King Toonjina and pierced the heart of his Queen with a keener shaft than steel. The royal couple shed copious tears of agony at this unexpected calamity among their subjects and determined to fight the monster to the last, if their own death could mitigate the sufferings of their people. From morning till night, from nightfall to dewy morn, the king and his queen worked ceaselessly among their people, bringing hope to every hamlet and every hut, visiting the remotest corners of their territories, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, cheering the dying and even cremating the dead. The royal coffers were emptied and the crown jewels were sold to buy food for the surviving few of Cāshmere. But it was a dire visitation, and human aid was of little or no avail.

IV

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months, but matters did not mend. People shut

in among the eternal snows of Cāshmere perished like a brood of birds in the hollow of a tree which could not communicate with the outer world. The distress became more acute when the rivers were frozen up in December. King Toonjina became sadly distressed at the sight of the ravages of the famine and his utter helplessness in the matter of relief. He gave way to despair. Day and night he worked for the unfortunate people. With knees bent he sent up fervent prayers to the feet of the Almighty to send succour to the land. But he cried in the wilderness. Cāshmere was doomed.



V

One night after a long fast and unavailing prayers the king lost the balance of his mind and began to weep like a child. The wailings of the king resounded through the silent corridors of the deserted palace, once sonorous with music and dance. Queen Bākpushtā, weary after her day's labours, was kneeling in her bed-chamber, unattended by her maids. With joined palms and supplicating upcast eyes, she was interceding with God Almighty on behalf of her people, her children who were now beyond the aid of man. She heard the piteous lamentations of the King

and hastened into his presence to enquire what ailed her lord. "Lady", said the King, "What is the use of a king's life if he cannot protect his people? The sin of the king is visited on his subjects, and I am certainly accountable for this appalling loss of lives in my kingdom. I can no longer bear this sight. In short, lady, I am determined to make an end of myself, so that the people may not say, "King Toonjina lived an inglorious life of ease while his subjects died for want of food."

VI

It is now that we find the Queen doing her part as the saviour of the situation. The heroic lady rose far above the ordinary run of women, and instead of timidly joining in the stream of unavailing tears of her lord, she tried her best to soothe and comfort him. She argued with him that suicide was nothing short of cowardice, and as long as there was a single soul, breathing in the land, so long the king was not free to throw away his own life even. The king must try to save himself in order to be serviceable to others. "If", said the Queen, "if we fail in our task to save the last surviving soul, then, and not till then, will come the time for us to

leave the world. We will then embrace the corpse of him that dies last and give up our lives by fasting."

While the Queen was thus engaged in her gentle persuasions, her face became radiant with a celestial halo, and her eyes sparkled with the beam of a divine fire. She seemed to be in a trance and spoke like one inspired. "No fear, my husband," went on the Queen, "if I have ever been a faithful wife unto thee, if my heart has ever bled truly in the grief of my subjects, if I have ever sent a sincere prayer to my God who is the Helper of the helpless, then there must be some way out of this hopeless situation. Rise, my lord, take heart, for this dark night of our trials must be nearing the dawn."

VII

So saying, sat Queen Bākpushtā in a desperate attitude of final prayer, committing her body and soul to the care of God. She was determined to win or die. How long could God resist the supplications of a selfless, helpless woman,—wife, mother and queen rolled into one,—bent to make her appeal heard before His eternal throne or die in the attempt? The Queen sat and wept, and prayed and watched, and lo and

behold ! down came a shower of dead pigeons from the skies,—a tremendous shower of pigeons large and small, without end, without rest,—here, there and everywhere. God listened to the cries of the Queen, because she had wept like an innocent child whose faith in His Providence is real and sincere. God hears the prayers of those that can pray like children. He loves those that have learnt to love His creatures.

VIII

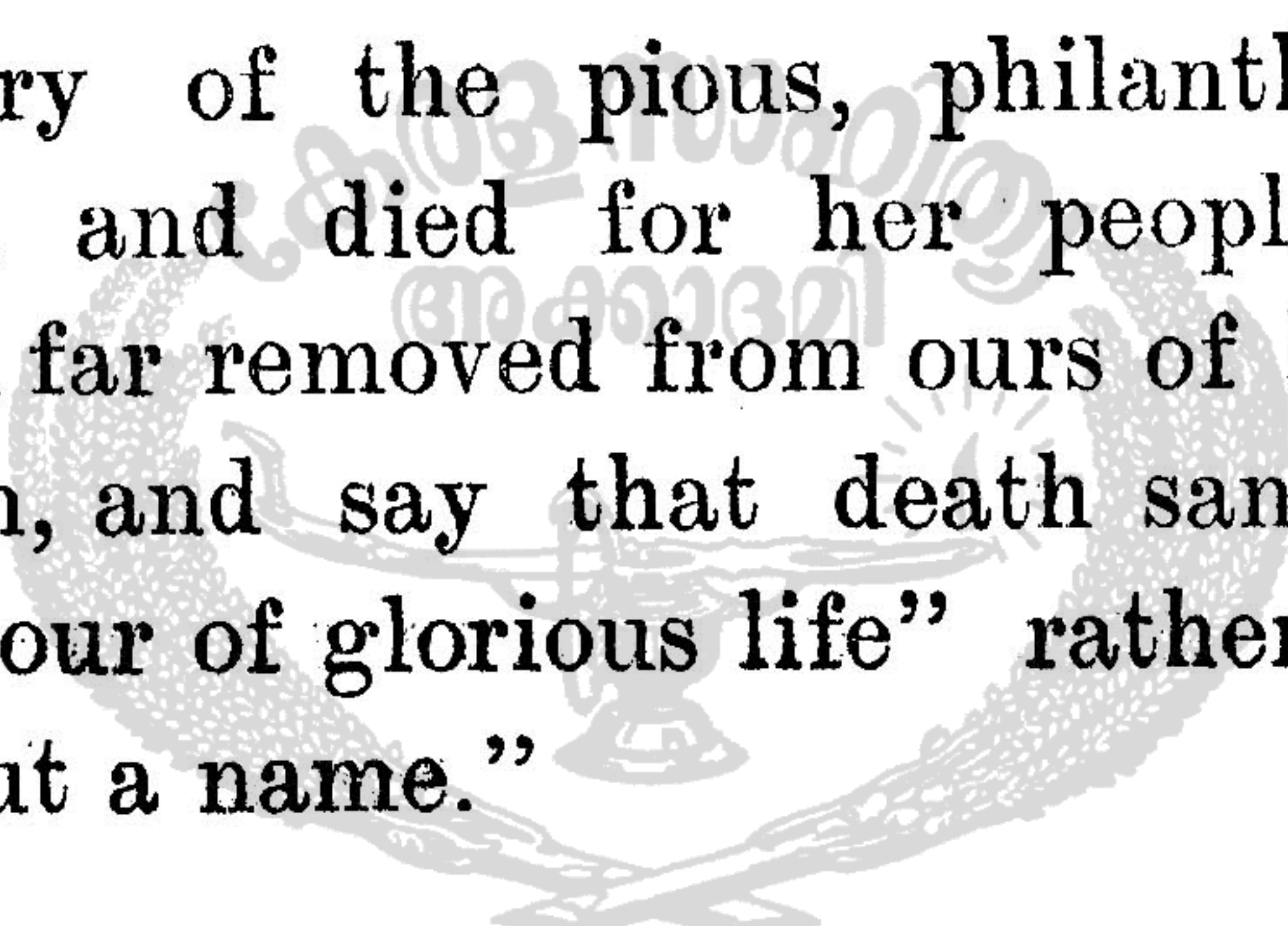
Now there was great rejoicing in the land. The people were fed on that inexhaustible supply of meat till the frost cleared up, the snows melted and the harvest time returned with a bumper crop. The land was saved, and Cāshmere once more became the home of plenty and beauty that she was. The king hailed his queen as the saviour of his dear people and conjointly offered heartfelt thanks to God.

IX

It is said that Prince Toonjina the Good left this world at the early age of forty. His queen like a faithful Hindu wife of those days mounted the funeral pyre of her husband, and their subjects set up a loud cry of lamentation, as

if they had lost their parents. The Queen raised both her hands from her place by the side of her dead husband and blessed all her people with a smile in her face that befitted the Immortals more than mortal men. The place where this Royal Couple put an end to their earthly labours is still pointed out as "*Bākpusth-tātabi*" or the grove of Bākpusthā.

Rest, weary pilgrim, by the side of this holy shrine to meditate and shed tears of gratitude in memory of the pious, philanthropic lady who lived and died for her people in an age that is far, far removed from ours of history and civilization, and say that death sanctifies "one crowded hour of glorious life" rather than "an age without a name."



SAMJUKTĀ.

(SELF-RESPECT).

I

The history of the Rājputs in India is a continuous story of chivalry and honour. The annals of the Rājput nation are a glowing record of noble deeds and heroic sacrifices. The incidents are so thrilling, and the instances so plentiful that it is really difficult to choose between boy and girl, or between man and woman. Every clan claims its hero, and each age transmits its rich legacy of greatness to the one that succeeds. Rājput history all along the line is what makes the reader pause and enquire how far that glorious race of India contributed to the greatness of the world's history.

Princess Samjuktā was a Rājput king's daughter and another Rājput king's wife. That is, however, at best a matter of course, and

does not justify her claim to any preferential treatment. But the life-story of Samjuktā has so deeply influenced the fate of Hindu India that she deserves more than a passing mention in the pages of history, and that is why we attempt here a pen-sketch of that extraordinary Rājput lady.

II

Towards the close of the twelfth century A. D., the old king Anangapāl sat on the throne of Delhi as the suzerain lord of Hindusthān. He had no son to succeed him to his vast kingdom. Of his two daughters, the elder married Bijaylāl, lord of Kanouj, an ornament of the Rāthor clan of the Rājputs, a memorable race of warriors holding sway in Upper India till their supremacy gave way before the conquering hordes of Turkestan. The younger of the daughters was married to Prince Someswar of Ajmere, a brave Rājput knight of the famous Chauhān clan noted in medieval India for dash and daring like the illustrious Douglasses of the Scottish Highlands. The king of Delhi was proud of his grandsons, the Rāthor Jay Chandra, son of Bijaylāl, and Chauhān Prithvirāj, son of Someswar, both of whom delighted his heart.

But the younger prince Prithvirāj was his special favourite. His right royal bearing, his soldierly qualities, his manly character and his affable manners placed him far above his royal cousin of Kanouj and fitted him eminently for the responsible duties of a ruler of men. So, old Anangapāl left by a royal decree the throne of Delhi to the Prince of Ajmere and closed his eyes in the peaceful sleep of death in 1182.

III

The final settlement of succession to the throne unsettled all the plans of Jay Chandra. It was a rude awakening to the dream he had all along been dreaming, as the senior of the rival claimants, of sitting upon the imperial throne of Delhi. The splendid throne and gorgeous Court of Imperial Delhi, the royal banner fluttering from the glittering turrets of the palace and the shining battlements of the fortress, the willing homage of a thousand vassal Chiefs,—all vanished fast from his eyes after dangling there for years together in a tempting show. For months together he had shrewdly guessed his grandfather's leaning to the Chauhān cause, but could not be brought

to believe that such a glaring injustice could really be perpetrated. But the unexpected came to pass, and though his jeers against the dead king's good sense were very caustic that evening before his youthful companions, he had to swallow the bitter pill with a good grace. Bowing to the inevitable royal decree he persuaded himself to bide his time to vent his bottled-up wrath against the innocent head of Prithvirāj who, he thought, had snatched from him his rightful inheritance. He swore by his sword so to revenge himself on the usurper that all Hindusthān would feel the shock. The terrible oath that escaped his lips was fraught with the direst consequence to Hindu supremacy in India then and thenceforward. Jealousy rankled sore in the heart of the baffled prince of Kanouj, and the hell-fire that it created there consumed himself, his family and his country, as it blazed forth in its growing fury day by day.

IV

So, the young King Prithvirāj, brave, handsome and magnanimous to a degree, the flower of ancient Indian chivalry, found himself seated on his grandfather's throne by the united suffrage of a nation. His place was secure in

the heart of a loyal people with all that vassal Kanouj could do to alienate him from the affections of his subjects. The grudge that his cousin bore him certainly did irreparable mischief to the country ; but it leaves no room for doubt that the heart of Hindusthān was sound, and it beat true to the call of the king and the country when occasion arose ; and the call did not come a moment too soon.

V

When Delhi and Kanouj were at daggers drawn shortly after the death of King Anangapāl, something was happening beyond the mountain walls of North West India to forge the strong fetters that would bind India in thralldom to the Mahomedan yoke. The fatal gift of beauty with which India has been endowed by Nature from time out of mind has ever attracted foreign invaders to her doors, and the conquest of the fertile plains of India with her fabulous wealth was always uppermost in the thoughts of her Mahomedan neighbours. The united efforts of the brave Rājputs, however, hitherto baffled all outside aggressions. But the tension of feeling between the two most powerful rival houses, Delhi and Kanouj, could

not escape the ever watchful eye of the Pathan Chief of Kabul, and Shahabuddin Mahammad Ghorî was loth to let slip this golden opportunity to try his luck in Hindusthān. The dice were thrown, and while cousin was wrangling with cousin over the gift of a grandfather, the terrible war cry of Islam was heard on the memorable field of Tirourî in the spring of 1191.

VI

A treeless, desert plain is the field of Tirourî on which the fate of Hindu India was decided more than seven centuries ago. Through this boundless ocean of sand which can only be used as the grave of humanity, the Mahomedan army under the skilful generalship of Shahabuddin Ghorî was advancing by rapid marches. It was a weary march through an unknown desert tract, but it had to be made, for there was wealth with honour at the end. The Crescent and Star of Islam fluttered in the breeze and revived the drooping spirits of the way-worn war-veterans from Afghanisthān.

As soon as the news reached Delhi, the Hindu army marched out of the gates of the city and encamped a few miles off. There the main body of the Rājput army fell into sections, and each

consisting of 25,000 infantry, 5,000 cavalry and 200 elephants proceeded with very cautious steps to oppose the Mahomedan advance. The right wing was commanded by Rānā Samar Singh of Chitor, a brother-in-law of the king of Delhi; the left by Rājā Rāimull of Bundi; King Prithvirāj himself led the centre. Kanouj stood grimly aloof.

VII

With the peep of dawn on the plains of Tirouri on March 21, 1191, the anxious eyes of the Chieftain of Ghor detected to his great surprise that a vast sea of human heads lay between himself and the throne of Delhi. So, without waiting to refresh his troops, he jumped headlong into the dashing waves that he might swim across to name and fame.

Ghori, however, had counted without the host. The battle raged loud and long from early dawn to mid-day, and the white sand of the desert plain ran purple with the blood of the Hindus and the Turks, but the result was yet undecided. Now the Turks, now the Hindus raised the deafening war-cry. They closed in a deadly combat and laid down their lives in their hundreds and thousands, but victory wavered

from side to side, till at last when the crimson sun was going down behind the distant Arāvallis, a dashing charge of Hindu cavalry led by Prithvirāj himself threw the wreck of the Mahomedan army into a wretched plight, and the men of Ghor fled pell-mell in an utter rout. Not a third of the whole army found its way back by the passes of North West India. Rājput honour was saved for sometime yet.

VIII

The first battle of Tirouri covered Rājput name in India with glory that can never fade. It brought undying fame to young Prithvirāj, the leader of the famous charge. But it gave a fresh cause of offence to his cousin of Kanouj who could ill brook that his rival should have obtained such a crushing victory over the Pathan Chief, and that so easily. The situation became very acute when the whole of Hindusthān combined to make her award of praise or blame after Tirouri had been fought and won. People idolised the brave Chauhān for his valour and patriotism while they had unmixed contempt for Jay Chandra. They made no secret of it. They cursed the deserter for having selfishly refrained from raising his sword in the defence of the

Motherland. The most stunning blow to Jay Chandra, however, was the rebellion in his own household. The only daughter of the Rāthor Chief had raised the standard of revolt. Princess Samjuktā received the news of Tirouri with unalloyed satisfaction, and had the boldness to reward the messenger with a necklace of pearls for his pains.

IX

Princess Samjuktā, the only daughter of the Chief of Kanouj, was the fairest maiden of Rājput India, as Prithvirāj was undoubtedly the bravest knight of Hindusthān. A right royal maiden was this daughter of Kanouj, and the graces of her person have been sung in immortal verse by Chānd, the friend and court minstrel of Prithvirāj. The thick clusters of her black hair descended in flowing wavelets down to her knees, and her large dark eyes, moving bewitchingly in their orbs, shed a soft radiance wherever they rested. Her slender form and graceful steps, her light smiles and musical voice, and her queenly bearing have all formed the theme of the poet of "Prithvirāj-Rāso," and need not be detailed here. But the graces of her person were the pride of Kanouj, and, to

speak the truth, Kanouj had reason to be proud of this fairest jewel worth all the mines of Golcondā.

X

Now the Princess of Kanouj had very early felt a strange attraction for her kinsman, the bravest knight of Indian chivalry. The report of the valour and magnanimity of young Prithvirāj captivated her youthful heart, and the daughter of his mortal foe, this Rājput Juliet of medieval India, learnt to enthrone the image of the brave Chauhān in the inmost recesses of her heart. Painted in the ruddy glow of love and admiration, the enchanting vision flitted past her eyes in the ecstasies of a dream. The thoughts of her young champion filled her soul with a rapturous delight. She would listen to the story of his exploits as to those of the great heroes of old, King Vikrama of the Indian legends or Arjuna, the great warrior of Epic India, but she would not tolerate comparison, and so inexplicable are the ways of Love that the more did the father grow to hate the name of Prithvirāj the more readily did the daughter learn to offer him her homage of adoration. None could offend her Prithvirāj who,

she believed, commanded universal esteem. Thus at the close of 1191 things stood exactly like this in the royal household of Kanouj; the father with his unbearable load of jealousy and hatred against the King of Delhi was walking down his path of doom across which stood the daughter with her homage of loving adoration for this mortal enemy of her father. Had they but a foretaste of the dire consequence of a house divided against itself!

XI

When things were at this pass, the jealousy rankling in the Rāthor's black heart leaked out in a peculiar channel. To conclusively prove his suzerainty over the various rival factions of India, particularly over the House of Delhi, designing Kanouj thought of celebrating a *Rājsuya** sacrifice. The Rāthor summoned the various Rājput princes to attend the ceremony, allotting to each of them a menial work as a token of his submission. Prithvirāj was peremptorily asked to attend as a gate-keeper, and Samar Singha, Rānā of Chitor, was called upon to mount guard outside the pavilion. But

* *Rājsuya*—A religious ceremony performed by a king as a token of his overlordship.

Jay Chandra wanted something more ; he wanted to kill two birds at a stone. He, therefore, announced, as a sequel to the sacrifice, the *Swayamvara** of his daughter Samjuktā who was herself to choose her husband from among the assembled princes who must, as a matter of course, recognise him as their overlord.

“If Prithvirāj come,” argued this cousin, “he shall eat the humble pie before the assembled knights of Hindusthān, and my madcap daughter, the black sheep of my family, will profit immensely by the lesson. If, on the other hand, his handsome young Majesty of Imperial Delhi have the boldness to disregard my summons, it will give me a very good pretext for beginning a campaign of armed hostilities to bring him to his senses.” “Last, though not least,” continued Jay Chandra, “it will set at rest the vexed question of Samjuktā’s marriage. How immensely will I enjoy her disappointment !” and the father chuckled within himself at the prospect of his daughter’s humiliation.

XII

“Man proposes, but God disposes” has been an accepted maxim all over the world, and there

* Swayamvara—A ceremony in which a royal maiden chooses her husband from among the invited guests.

was not the least variation from this truth in this case also. Prithvirāj did not deign to send a reply to the bragging note of his cousin ; and Samar Singha made the messenger ride a donkey, and kicked him out of Chitor. At this open defiance of his assumed authority Jay Chandra swore a mighty oath to have his revenge when he would be free. In the meantime, he caused a grotesque earthen statue of Prithvirāj, and made it stand as a door-keeper at the entrance to the Hall of Choice.

A host of Kshatriya chiefs answered the summons of Kanouj to help at the ceremony, and there was a great reception in the city. The palace and its grounds wore a gala look on the festive occasion. There were great preparations in the capital in view of the *Swayamvara* of Princess Samjuktā, and people were eagerly expecting the tournament which was to take place in a week or so.

XIII

The news of the *Swayamvara* reached the Princess, and along with that she also heard that the knight of her choice had not even been asked to the wedding. A great outrage had, moreover, been perpetrated by setting up a caricature

image of the great King of Delhi, and representing him as the head waiter at the wedding feast. She shuddered to think of the consequence of this gross insult to His Majesty of Delhi, but that was a different matter. She thought of the immediate present. Her father was an implacable foe of the King of Delhi with whom her fate was indissolubly linked up. She had once given herself up in thought to Prithvirāj, and could not now barter herself away elsewhere for all the world. To marry against her own free will would be a terrible blow to her self-respect. But the machination of her father pointed to that. The princess, however, as a high-souled and heroic lady, could never stoop to such meanness. She took counsel with her own heart and formed her resolution ; she would marry the knight of her own choice or remain a maid for ever. She could do nothing else as her self-respect was at stake.

XIV

Samjuktā made a last effort at achieving the desired end of her life, and it was a desperate effort. Strength came from an unknown somewhere and revived her drooping spirits. The gloom that had enveloped her soul passed away

and left it like the glaring sun that had emerged from the darkness of hovering clouds. She would do something to save the situation.

When the insult done to the King of Delhi was burning like fire in the hearts of his loyal subjects, and sadness was brooding over the royal mansions at the prospect of an inevitable fratricidal war within the eastern principality, a trusty messenger rode post-haste from the city of Kanouj and pulled up at the main entrance to the newly built fortress of *Rāi Pithorā*. After he had satisfied the sentry at the gate that he was a friend, the man was taken straightway to the presence of the king.

“I come from the Princess Samjuktā,” said the man with great respect, and as he said this he took from the folds of his turban a tiny missive carefully bound in a lace of scarlet silk, —“I deliver this letter unto Your Majesty,” solemnly continued the messenger, “and charge you in the name of chivalry to be the lace-bound brother* of the distressed lady,” and he twined the lace round the king’s wrist on behalf of the daughter of Kanouj.

* The custom of sending a *rākhi* (a lace) to a chosen knight for succour at the moment of need was in vogue among the Rājputs in ancient India. It was an invitation of honour.

The king broke the seal of the letter and read in it the following lines written by the Princess herself :—

“The heart of Samjuktā beats true to the call of Love and Duty. Unless rescued by His Majesty of Delhi in a week’s time, she goes to her death at the mock Swayamvara in her father’s hall. Samjuktā looks for succour from the lord of her heart. Failing this she will prefer death to dishonour.”

Prithvirāj was deeply moved. He dismissed the messenger with a miniature picture of himself to be delivered unto the Princess with as little delay as possible. The miniature had below it the following autograph of the king :
“True to my lady, the Princess of Kanouj.”

XV

Seven hundred Rājput horsemen, led by a dashing young cavalier, issued out of the gates of *Rāi Pithorā*, and turning their horses’ heads eastward darted hoadlong through the darkness of the evening. There was no talking, no shouting. Each one of the party seemed to know his business well, and each one knew that he was going to death or glory. Prithvirāj, for the young cavalier was no less a personage, was

going to honour the invitation of the Princess of Kanouj. The king's bodyguard, his faithful companions in weal and woe, would not let him go alone.

When the party had ridden hard for hours together, and the night was drawing to a close, they pulled up in a grove near Kanouj. Leaving the jaded animals there to refresh themselves at their will, they hastily changed their warriors' cloaks and dispersed in small batches of two or three peaceful cultivators. When morning came, they effected an entrance into the city as curious sight-seers from the adjoining villages and stationed themselves about the Hall of Choice.

XVI

At last broke the ominous day when the Kanouj Princess was to make her bridal choice. It was a day of great rejoicing in the city, and from early dawn an incessant stream of curious spectators, poured forth towards the reception pandal which stood on an extensive field before the palace. To describe the beauty and grandeur of the hall were a fruitless task. The genius of Kanouj procured all that was beautiful and all that was rare from far and near. The arrangements made left nothing to desire and pleased

every age and every taste. They challenged the most fastidious critic to find fault with the decorations.

Why all this display of scenic grandeur? Was it due to an excess of paternal solicitude for the Princess Samjuktā? Certainly not. The Rāthor would humble the Chauhān in the eye of the world.

But to Samjuktā it was a day of trial. She was going to make her choice, not between man and man, but between Life and Death. She stood before the tribunal of Honour and Self-respect to receive her doom. Would she rise, or would she fall? She rose, as the womanhood of India has ever risen to the height of an occasion like this.

XVII

The cream of the Rājput aristocracy, the princes of the bluest Kshatriya blood, have assembled in the Hall of Choice, and are seated on golden thrones according to their rank. Each one is anxious that he may look fairer and younger than his neighbour. Each one is not half so sure as his neighbour that the prize will fall to his share. Everybody is anxious about himself; but nobody misses Prithvirāj, the bravest of

them all. It is the mockery of a Rāmāyana where Rām Chandra is left out of the play.

Presently the blare of trumpets announces that the daughter of Kanouj is approaching the proud assembly to choose a partner in life. All the decorative skill her maids can command has been called into service to set off her beauty in bold relief. Nature is aided by the human hand to complete her work. So, when the Queen of that bridal choice, gaily decked in her wedding jewels and closely veiled in a saffron scarf, enters the Hall with slow and dignified steps, every knight rises to his feet to send on his homage of adoration. His eyes drink in this moving vision of loveliness. His ears listen to the sweet music of her soft footfall. His heart goes out in worship at this Temple of Love. There is a spell over the Hall.

Samjuktā is preceded by a herald. This functionary introduces to her each one of the suitors in turn. For a minute or two she halts before each throne to hear the herald describe in glowing eulogy the feats achieved by the prince. She makes her respectful obeisance, and moves on to the next. The highly tempting sandal-paste and the much coveted garland of flowers rest on her tray of gold. They

have yet to mark out the blessed darling of fortune.

XVIII

While uncertainty tosses the suitors between the madness of hope and the sadness of disappointment, the troubled heart of the Princess is in eager expectation of her promised relief. Her eyes are wandering in a fruitless search of her chosen knight who has assured her of his constancy. Has Prithvirāj forgotten his vow? Samjuktā cannot believe it. The King of Delhi is a king every inch of him. He will be shortly coming. Her nerves are strengthened, and she is composed. The herald has yet a few minutes left for his advocacy.

To the amazement of all Samjuktā passes the last individual of that galaxy of princes, turning her back upon the whole lot. She is an inexplicable mystery to her father; she is no less a puzzle to her father's guests.

She reaches the door and looks up again. Her eyes meet whom she wants: but in a distorted, grotesque, earthen statue of a door-keeper. The blood of her race is up in her veins. The Rāthor is visibly stamped on her brow. The pride and courage inherited from

her father stir the inmost soul of the daughter, and send her into rebellion against paternal government.

Careless of consequences the fearless maiden of Kanouj throws the marriage garland round the neck of the distorted image. She hurls a deliberate defiance at the royal authority of Kanouj. All this happens in the twinkling of an eye, and none can prevent it.

XIX

Roaring like a lion smoked out of his lair, the Rāthor chief springs upon his daughter with a drawn sword to make an end of her accursed life. The blow is raised, but before it can come down, it is parried with an unerring counter-stroke from an unknown hand. Lo! there stands a tall and handsome young horseman, dressed in full uniform, fearless like the hero of a hundred fights. Before they can well realize the situation the knight bends over the prostrate form of the senseless lady, lifts the precious load behind his saddle and gallops off like an arrow that is sped. King Jay Chandra discovers, when it is too late, that the young hero is no other than his mortal foe, the King of Delhi, come in person to claim his bride.

All at once the banquet-hall in the palace of Kanouj changes into an army headquarters, and while the clang of swords and clatter of horses' hoofs resound through the streets of the unsuspecting city, Prithvirāj on his gallant charger has got a clear start of a couple of miles or so. A hot pursuit ensues, but the seven hundred Imperial Guards stand like an impenetrable wall between Kanouj and Delhi, and the Poet Chānd, ever faithful to his friend and king, cheers up Prithvirāj and his winsome bride with the sweet strains of his soul-stirring minstrelsy. The river of blood flows deeper and wider behind, but the muttered oath of Kanouj fails of its fulfilment, and sweet revenge is deferred till time is ripe.



XX

A year had passed since the romance of the *Swayamvara* was enacted on the banks of the blue-watered Jumna. The year was a dream of poetic bliss to the young King and Queen of Delhi. Life was an incessant round of beauty and enjoyment to the loving couple. But alas ! happiness flies too swiftly, and when the royal couple awoke from their dream of elysian bliss, the gloom on the political horizon of India caught their eyes, and they discovered the clouds of doom lowering on

the western sky. For the Chief of Kanouj, baffled, humiliated and mortified beyond degree, was ever on the look-out for catching his enemy on the hip. That arch-traitor to his king and country designed the darkest villainy that was to blot the pages of India's history for all time to come. India shuddered through her length and breadth when the fiendish plot was discovered. Kanouj invited the Pathan Chief of Ghor to try another chance against Delhi with the promise that the Hindu would aid the Mahomedan in crushing his Hindu brother for ever and a day.

XXI

Early next year, the Mahomedan war-cry was again heard across the plains of Tirouri. Shahabuddin Ghorî, encouraged by the invitation of the dark man of Kanouj who backed his word with an endless supply of men, money and rations, hurried across the borders with his picked soldiers and encamped on the bank of the Drishadwati. The King and Queen of Delhi saw how the motherland was threatened and threw all their energies in a final struggle for independence. An army was raised, and though Kanouj and the Rāthor faction stood grimly aloof at this

imperial crisis, the Rānā of Chitor was true to his king and came to do or die in the cause of national freedom. Samjuktā encouraged her lord with glowing words of duty and patriotism, and while buckling her husband's armour on to his brawny frame, the apprehensions of an unknown danger troubled her soul, and nobody noticed the few scalding drops that rolled down her cheeks. As she watched the king march out at the head of his magnificent troops, she sighed to herself : "Go, my lord, to glory and immortality. We meet shortly in the presence of our Maker, where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest."

XXII

The second battle of Tirouri was fought and lost. The incensed Chief of Kanouj embraced the Pathan as a comrade-in-arms, and fought like a demon by the side of his new ally, far removed from him in language, creed and nationality. An unquenchable thirst for revenge blinded him to his best interests, and though the valiant troops of Delhi stood like an adamant rock round the Imperial banner till a drop of true Kshatriya blood was left in them to defend it, treachery did its worst. Young Prithvirāj,

with the sword of old Anangapāl in his hand and the armour of conscience around his breast, fell to sleep on the bed of heroes for which the true patriot all over the world has longed from time out of memory.

The shades of evening were falling fast on the plains and meadows by the crystal streams of the Jumnā, when they brought the news to Samjuktā. The light of day was vanishing into the darkness of night. But the gloom that enveloped the heroic soul of Samjuktā broke into the glow of a divine light that sparkled in her eyes, when she heard how the Rājput had fought and died for his country and his Crown. And now the Queen, finding that her earthly mission was at an end, ordered the funeral pyre to be got ready with as little delay as possible. She threw her jewels into the fire, and with the miniature picture of her lord on her breast, she stepped lightly into the leaping flames. Weep not, all who listen to the tragic end of the last Hindu Queen of Delhi. It was the supreme moment of her triumph over Infamy and Disgrace. It was a splendid triumph of Honour and Self-respect.

Thus ended Hindu Knighthood in India ; and, with the death of King Prithvirāj and

Queen Samjuktā after the second battle of Tirouri, Delhi saw another sight, and the Islam banner fluttered gaily over the highest dome of *Rāi Pithorā*, flouting at the earthly remains of India's best and loveliest.



PĀNNĀ BĀI.

(DUTY).

My gentle reader, it is hoped, will not now run away with the impression that womanhood in India has nothing but a passive tenderness to hold up as its ideal. The following story is introduced to relieve the proverbial softness of the Indian woman's character. History does not present a parallel to the sacrifice that was demanded of, and willingly made by the heroic Rājput lady, Pānnā Bāi, under very trying circumstances.

I

It was considerably past the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The fate of India was decided by the adventurous Babar on the memorable field of Panipāt. His greatest Hindu rival, Rānā Sangrām Singha of Mewār, was no more. His son Udai Singha, a helpless baby was sleeping the innocent sleep of childhood.

The affairs of State were conducted by a Council of Regency, presided over by Banabeer, an illegitimate boy of Pritho Rāi, a brother of the late Rānā. Banabeer Singha was a young man of great promise, and as the nearest kinsman of the minor he was elected by the people's suffrage to be the guardian of his person and trustee of the State. For a time the arrangement worked well, and the Regent justified the confidence the people of Mewār reposed in his honesty. But a period of uninterrupted enjoyment of the Imperial dignity, the dazzling glare of regal splendour and the willing homage of a great people turned Banabeer's head. He resolved to substitute the reality for the shadow. The canker of ambition ate into his vitals. He hearkened unto the counsels of perfidy and chose to seize the Crown by removing all obstacles from his path. Macbeth-like, this young custodian of Mewār's trust looked down from his giddy height and tumbled head over heels.

II.

It was a pitch dark night that found Banabeer ready for the perpetration of the blackest villainy in the annals of Rājasthān. The silence that reigned amidst the enveloping gloom was

broken by the screeching owl and the moaning wind that sighed past the walls of Rānimahal in which the young prince lay in charge of his nurse Pānnā Bāi. A faithful old retainer of the family rushed in a hurry into the apartment next to the nursery, and shaken all over with fear, informed Pānnā of the wicked design of Banabeer upon the life of the young Prince.

“At midnight,” said the trembling messenger, “comes the thief into the room to snatch the life of the baby and offer it as an oblation to his thirst for power. The lady in whose maternal keeping the child is safe till now, is solemnly adjured to save, while there is time, the only scion of the house of Bāppā Rāo from the murderous knife of the protector. In the intoxication of reckless youth and kingly power the Regent strikes so that the last link between Rānā Sangrām and the vacant throne of Mewār snaps in two.”

Terrible words were these that greeted the unsuspecting ears of the nurse ! She realised the helpless situation of the baby ; she realized her own position. But she would not betray her sacred charge if she could help it. She suckled the Royal baby ; she clothed him ; she fed him ;

she loved the orphan with all the tender love of a mother. The Queen, when she lay dying, had charged Pānnā in the name of all that was holy, to protect the only surviving scion of the Imperial House. How could she now abandon the child to his fate ? She looked around the room and found the imploring eyes of the departed Queen fixed upon her in anxious suspense to test, as it were, the truth of a mortal's plighted word.

Pānnā Bāi resolved to rise to the sacred call of duty. She would save the child. There was no time to lose. She put the sleeping child in an empty fruit-basket, covered it over with some leaves gathered in haste and made over the precious load to the messenger to take it out of harm's way. The man left the palace as stealthily as he had entered it. Fortune blessed his endeavours. A faithful old menial of the family, he happened to be a frequent visitor at the palace, and his movements did not excite the suspicions of the dozing sentry that mounted guard at the palace gate. From a window Pānnā saw the messenger safe across the danger zone and returned to her post by the side of the vacant bed to devise means as to how she could stand the rest of the ordeal.

III

The palace gong boomed the midnight hour and every stroke fell like the grave-digger's thud on Pānnā's ears. With a resolute calm she awaited the approaching foot-fall of the would-be murderer. And she had not long to wait. Banabeer with the determined step of a hired executioner entered the nursery and demanded of the lady where the young prince was. Pānnā pointed to the couch of the boy Uday Singha. Without a word the ruffian made for the bed and taking out a dagger that glittered in the faint light of the dimly burning lamp, plunged it up to the hilt into the bosom of the sleeping child. Banabeer thought the only obstacle that lay between him and the throne of Mewār was removed. Banabeer murdered sleep and the next morning he discovered, though it was too late, that he was destined to "sleep no more."

IV

Now, reader, will you guess who the murdered baby was? It was Chandan, the five-year-old boy of Pānnā Bāi, whom she put into the bed of her master's child after she had sent him to

safety. It was her only boy, the delight of her eyes, the flesh of her flesh and the bone of her bone, the child whom she had nursed and suckled for five long years and whom she looked up to for solace and comfort in her old age. It was the best treasure she possessed on earth and it was the best thing that she could offer as a sacrifice at the altar of duty and loyalty. She witnessed as a silent spectator, the murderer plunge the knife into her own child's breast, though she could have saved him if she chose. Not a muscle of her face moved when she stood there like a rock to answer the glorious call of duty. From the salt she ate of the Royal family of Mewār she received her body, her station, her strength, her baby and her everything. True to the salt, she redeemed the debt of gratitude she owed and the word that she had plighted. With nerves as strong as those of any renowned Marshal on the field of battle, with eyes dry as the summer dust, Pānnā attended to the last rites of her only child and hastened to join the Imperial baby in his exile.

It may be contended that Pānnā Bāi could have easily left with both the prince and her own baby at the time Banabeer's design was communicated to her. But the wisdom of the

plan did not commend itself to her. The sudden exit of a large party might have aroused the suspicion of the sentry; and granting that the gate was thrown open to them by some kind Providence, the party would surely have been overtaken by the troops of Banabeer sent in hot pursuit. This would have led to the utter failure of the plan of the sagacious lady to save the life of the prince.

V

Ransack the pages of history for a similar act of superhuman sacrifice, wonderful loyalty and unselfish devotion to duty, and tell me if you can discover a parallel in any country all the world over. Pānnā is gone; but the race of Bāppā Rāo, passing through a series of vicissitudes still continues on the *Guddee* of Mewār. Pānnā is dead; the corporeal frame of the heroic nurse has vanished into thin air. But when will the *Dadhichi-spirit* which animated that woman's frame cease to inspire thousands of Hindu men and women in the heroic land of Rājasthān? "When shall," we repeat with the famous English Poet, "when shall her glory fade?" She holds her place secure in the hearts of the wondering band of patriots who have

learnt to love their king and the country as manifested in the spirit of loyalty shown to our King in the recent European War. Were Pānnā Bāi born in the more bracing climate of Europe or America, her life-story would have formed the theme of poets and orators. But this unfortunate land of ours has not yet learnt to appreciate the departed great as they deserve. This is why we rest satisfied by thanking the courtesy of a European historian for a passing reference to this extraordinary display of superhuman nobility.



PADMINI.*

(HONOUR).

I

This is yet another brilliant page in the records of the medieval glory of India. The tale of Rājput chivalry would be miserably short of narration if it passed lightly over the life-story of the incomparable Padmini. For, the part that a great woman plays in creating the glorious tradition of a country is in no way inferior to the share borne by a great man ; and Padmini is the central link in the chain of the national glory that has amply justified the claim of Chitor to be worshipped as the greatest shrine of Rājput chivalry and sacrifice in ancient India.

II

More than seven hundred years ago, when the Pathan in the obdurate zeal for conquest was trying to carry the banner of Islam in Hindus-

* Based mainly on Todd's "Annals of Rājasthān"—abridged by C. F. Payne.

thān from the Himālayas in the extreme North to Comorin in the extreme South, and the Rājput was maintaining his birth-right as a free man at an exorbitant cost of much precious blood, when province after province was yielding in rapid succession before the unrelenting sword of the conquering Turk, the young Mahārānā Lakshman Singha was seated on the throne of Mewār, and successfully defied the troops of the great Khilji of Delhi under the protecting wings of his uncle, the heroic Rānā Bhīm Singha, military Governor of the Fort of Chitor. Alauddin Khilji, however, kept a very watchful eye on the movements of the Chief of Mewār. The Pathan Emperor was anxious not so much for the sandy tracts of a western desert, for these would make but little addition to the Imperial coffers at Delhi; but his heart was set firm on carrying off the beautiful Padmini, wife of Rānā Bhīm Singha, who was reported to be the loveliest woman in all Hindusthān.

The fiat came forth from Delhi that the greatest Pathan conqueror of India must have the fairest Padmini to wear in his crown; or, by Allāh, God of the true believer, he would extirpate the race of mountain-rats that would venture to thwart the Imperial will.

III

So, like the Assyrian hordes that invaded the plains of Judah in the days of old, the ruthless myrmidons of the great Khilji crossed the treeless sands by the Arāvalli Hills and fell upon the innocent cultivators of the outlying districts of Mewār. The strange wooing commenced and Chitor lay at the mercy of the invaders. Fire, pillage and bloodshed marked the way of the Pathan army. The heavy gates in the stone walls of the Red Fort of Chitor were shut against the enemy. A council of war was summoned in haste, and the Rājput veterans decided upon fighting the enemy to the last drop of their blood. They would not brook this wanton insult to the honour of the protecting Angel of Mewār. They stood round the "Padmini Mahal" as an impenetrable rock of protection, and raising a lusty cheer in the name of Padmini, the war-broken veterans of Chitor kissed their swords and vowed death to him who had dared to stretch his arm to desecrate Rājput honour with its unholy touch. The Rājput reply was not slow to reach the ears of Alauddin. It added fuel to the fire.

IV

It was some time that the Pathan troops lay encamped outside Chitor and devastated the country round, little expecting that the mountain-rats would peep out of their holes. But they were sadly mistaken. One morning they found to their terror and amazement that one of the wall-gates was flung wide-open. Instantly a stream of Rājput warriors rushed out on the plains and formed themselves in battle array. All this happened in the twinkling of an eye. The brunt of the Hindu onslaught fell suddenly upon the advanced Mahomedan posts, and before they could well realize the gravity of the situation, the Hindus had worked incalculable mischief in the enemy camps and retired into the fort without sustaining any appreciable loss. This news gave a very rude shock to the Emperor's dream of bliss, and in the fury of desperation he personally led a charge against the main gate in the city-wall. Bhim Singha and his men, however, gave them a very hot reception. Alauddin had to fall back, and before long the Pathan realized that the race of mountaineers had perfect mastery over the arts of offence and defence. These sudden sallies were

repeated almost every day, till the besiegers, worn out between the extremes of inaction now and the fury of an unexpected attack the next moment, thought of abandoning the project for some time.

V

To add to the troubles of the Imperial Suitor, a very disquieting news arrived from Delhi at this juncture. The Hindu Chief of Guzerāt who had rendered his homage to the Pathan authority a short time back, had raised the standard of revolt and aided by a large contingent of Moghul troops was marching upon the Imperial Capital to strike a blow for freedom. For this unexpected turn of events the Emperor was not the least prepared. It upset all his plans of conquering Chitor and winning "the Lotus of Mewār." He had to send large drafts of his men for the defence of his Capital and extend the hand of diplomatic friendship to the Rānā of Mewār.

Negotiations were immediately opened. Alauddin dissembled his motives as far as possible. He was highly impressed, he said, at the bravery of Mewār. The patriotic conduct of the Rājputs excited his envy and admiration. He would not

lose the opportunity of shaking hands with such a magnanimous foe. He himself offered the olive branch of peace. As a proof positive of the sincerity of his motives he had already sent, he affirmed, the greater part of his army home, and he would soon be leaving. Only as a signal mark of his royal condescension he would pay a visit to the hospitable Rānā of Chitor and have a look,—only a look—at the ‘Lotus of Mewār,’ the fame of whose dazzling beauty had brought him across a vast sandy desert on a perilous journey.



VI

The generals of Chitor met again in conference in the Audience Hall. The message of Alauddin was read in the midst of the silence of scorn and indifference. Mahārānā Lakshman Singha was absorbed in anxious cogitation. Well did he know why Alauddin was in such an indecent hurry to raise the siege of Chitor; for the messenger from Guzerāt who had come to seek the advice of Rānā Bhim Singha was not yet well across the borders of Mewār. Well did he know that the Pathan would honour him with a second visit the moment he could dispose of the Guzerāt rebellion. But he was not sure

if it was a good policy to shed any more loyal blood just now, or to reserve all the man-power of his kingdom for a future encounter some months later. In his indecision he turned to his uncle, the Rānā Bhim Singha, for a solution.

“Mahārānā,” replied the veteran general, “it looks absurd that the Pathan so easily offers the hand of friendship. He has not yet felt a tenth part of the strength of Mewār in resisting aggression. The entire manhood of the kingdom has not yet been called up. But that is a different question. In a matter like this,” went on the stalwart Chief, “in a matter which touches the honour of a lady whom the nation adores, it were good if we asked the nation what it wants. This Council represents the whole of Mewār.”

Prince Ari Singha, heir-apparent to the Guddee of Mewār, stood up and said, “If as a trusted representative of the people I am entitled to have my say, I can assure Your Highness that the nation is now, as ever, at one in fighting it out with the boasting rabble outside. But good sense seems to have prevailed in the Council Chamber of the audacious Khilji, and the main part of the army is by this time on its way back to Delhi. We have therefore to check with

difficulty the ardour of our men to try their strength against the Imperial troops. But the price of our safety is enormous. Admit the Moslem as a forced guest in the "Padmini Mahal" and you defile the holy temple. The nation will not allow the perpetration of this desecration and refers the question to the decision of the lady herself."

The boy Bādal, a nephew of the Queen, was immediately sent to her apartments. He came back with the following reply :—"The beauty of Padmini is nothing to the life of so many heroes of Mewār. Gladly will she receive His Imperial Majesty as a distinguished guest, if, by so doing, she finds that Chitor has been spared the horrors of a cruel war. The Emperor will be admitted to the honour of a seat beside her husband, the Rānā Bhim Singha, on condition he does not abuse the hospitality of Mewār when he sees that beauty, the report of which has drawn him into this thorny bush."

VII

Great preparations were being made inside Chitor for the reception of the Pathan Emperor of Delhi. The palace of the Rānā was decorated to suit the taste of a luxurious Eastern Chief.

The Padmini Mahal wore a festive look. Flags and festoons fluttered gaily in the breeze, garlands waved, and the floors and stairs were covered with a Damask carpet of the richest hues. Precious viands and costly wines were procured to please the fastidious palate of the Imperial epicure, and the men and women of Chitor eagerly looked for the day when the Emperor of Delhi would be received as a guest by Rānā Bhim Singha.

The Rājput had given his word to receive the greatest enemy of his race and family as the best of friends under his roof. On that day, at least, no angry scowl would blacken his brow, no sinful thought would cross his heart for all the world.

VIII

Alauddin with half a dozen trusted followers entered Chitor on the appointed day and found a very cordial reception waiting for him. The royal *Nahabat** poured forth its soul-enthraling strains and supplied the welcome music. There was a true ring of sincerity in the words of Rānā Bhim Singha when, on behalf of his nephew,

* The native band.

the Mahāranā, he expressed his appreciation of the friendly spirit of the Overlord of Delhi.

“The Mewār Durbār,” said the Rānā, “greatly values this opportunity of meeting the Emperor of Delhi as a friend instead of as a foe, and will try to make Your Majesty as comfortable as can be expected of a simple-hearted tribe of soldiers noted for the bluntness of their speech and manners. To the Rājput, the guest, of whatever creed and colour, is a brother, and the Rājput extends to him a brother’s privileges in his family.”

“We send through Your Highness,” said the Khilji Emperor, “our friendly greetings to the Mewār Durbār, and hope that we may, as has been said by Your Highness, enjoy a brother’s liberty in your family to-day.”

Probably the words stuck to the throat of this Arch-dissembler when he made a show of his friendliness to Rānā Bhim Singha whom he supposed to be the greatest obstacle between himself and Rānee Padmini.

IX

Whatever might be Alauddin’s real feeling on that occasion, there is no doubt that a dire conflict was going on in his impulsive heart.

Was it not a thousand times more prudent, argued his better nature, to gain the real friendship of such a brave and magnanimous foe than to earn his implacable hatred by persecuting him unjustly for a woman's sake? But before the answer came, the voluptuous strain of music struck up by a famous choir of dancing girls had taken the Emperor away into the dreamland of the black-eyed Houris of Paradise, and he threw all considerations of fairness and justice to the winds.

X

While the dancing girls were engaged in their song, Rānā Bhim Singha led Alauddin into a richly furnished outer chamber against whose wall a large mirror was hanging covered with a silken screen from top to bottom. As soon as the royal guest entered the room the screen parted and revealed a female form of exquisite beauty reflected in the glass. The Mahomedan stood still for a moment before this mirror. Was this Padmini—the wife of an accursed unbeliever—a woman in flesh and blood? He could not believe his eyes. The ladies in the Imperial seraglio in Delhi were not even fit to touch her feet. The tints of her complexion were borrowed from the rainbow in

the sky. Her eyes were more bewitching than the gazelle's; her teeth were whiter than a set of the whitest pearl, her cheeks ruddier than the rosiest apple, and her stature more graceful than the fairies of his dream. His imagination could not paint a picture so sweet as the vision of loveliness that opened before his enchanted gaze. The fragrance of her breath filled the chamber and Alauddin, transported into a wonderland of poesy and romance, forgot that *she* prized her honour greater than *he* thought of her beauty.

Forgetting that he was alone and unguarded, forgetting that as a guest he was in a holy temple that afforded him protection against all his impertinence, forgetting, lastly, that he was promise-bound to behave like a brother under that hospitable roof, Alauddin made for the mirror and stretched his right hand towards the angelic form that was reflected in the glass.

Before Rānā Bhim Singha had time to warn the infatuated Emperor of the impropriety of such disgraceful conduct, the raised sword in the hand of the young Rājput lad Bādal was about to descend on the head of its victim. But Rānā Bhim Singha intervened with lightning speed between Bādal and Alauddin who stepped back with a shriek of terror and fainted away.

XI

After the unpleasant episode narrated above, Alauddin strolled through the various compartments of the reception chamber in moody silence. Baffled, humiliated, but not vanquished, his evil nature now began to assert itself. The war that was raging in his heart between the man and the brute now ended in a dishonourable victory for the latter. 'Philip Sober' appealed to 'Philip Drunk' and the result was inevitable. Alauddin determined once more to carry off the prize even at the risk of setting Chitor ablaze with fury. The game was worth the candle. He chuckled within himself as the dark design flashed across his brain.

Courtesy led Rānā Bhim Singha to accompany his guest outside the fort to see him off. The simple-hearted Rājput came unguarded, as the Pathan, he thought, could not be ungrateful to the saviour of his life. The party was proceeding slowly on horseback, and nothing disturbed the silence that prevailed except the clatter of the horses' hoofs against the stony pathway leading from the hillfort to the plains below. The Emperor broke the silence.

Turning abruptly towards Bhim Singha, he said, "Rānā Bhim Singha, I cannot go back to Delhi without Padmini. For the good of your family and for the good of Mewār, make over Padmini to me."

"Unreasonable and ungrateful man," said the brave Rājput shaking with indignation, "you should know that the shield of hospitality has not made you invulnerable at all places and—"

Before he could finish, a signal from the Emperor to his attendants made the Rānā painfully understand that he was a prisoner of Alauddin.

He submitted, as he could not do otherwise. Between personal liberty and the respect of his wife he preferred to lose what could be recovered.

XII

Over this unparalleled treachery of a royal guest the sun set that evening behind the hills of Chitor. Before the next sun shone over the battlements of the citadel the news had spread from home to home in wide Mewār that the generous Rānā Bhim Singha was a captive at the hands of the wily Turk and that he could not be released without the heaviest ransom,—the surrender of 'the Lotus of Mewār.'

Rānee Padmini heard the news, though she was not at first inclined to believe that the world was so wicked as to stoop so low. But it was a stern reality. Her husband was a prisoner in the Pathan camp. He had to be rescued, or Chitor could not stand another siege from Delhi. Padmini shuddered to think of the fate of Mewār. But how could her husband be possibly rescued without the ransom? Her life she could easily give, but not her honour. It was more precious than life.

But something must be done. She sent for General Gorā, her uncle, Commander of the Mewār Forces in the absence of Rānā Bhim Singha. The brave lad Bādal, her young nephew, was impatient of strategy. He proposed to cut his way through the Pathan army, sword in hand, and bring back the Rānā. With five hundred men at his beck and call and a good sword by his side he wanted nothing more. The veteran old general restrained him with difficulty.

They decided upon taking a prompt measure, every thing depending upon speed and caution now. By evening Chitor knew that Rānee Padmini would surrender herself to rescue Rānā Bhim Singha, without whom Chitor could not stand any future Mahomedan attack.

So Padmini communicated her decision of surrendering to the Khilji Emperor, and wanted permission to be attended by her maids-of-honour before proceeding to her future home with His Imperial Majesty.

Alauddin was glad beyond measure that his long-cherished dream was approaching realization. He knew that Padmini would surrender; no woman could do otherwise under the circumstances. What womanly heart, he thought, was proof against the charm of power, wealth, beauty and enjoyment? According to all human calculation,—according to Alauddin's calculation at least—Padmini was but an ordinary woman, and she was bound to yield. The conqueror readily agreed to the terms of her capitulation.

XIII

Punctually at sunrise on the morning of the appointed day when the Pathan camp was looking festive against the arrival of Rānee Padmini, and the soldiers were making themselves merry at the prospect of a speedy return to a life of comparative ease in the Imperial Capital, a solemn procession of seven hundred palanquins, each carried by four stout bearers,

was found to issue out of the fort of Chitor and slowly wind its way down the steep hill-side towards the camp of the Khilji Emperor. The procession headed by the litter of Rānee Padmini herself consisted of the maids-of-honour waiting upon Her Highness and permitted by Alauddin to accompany his new love to her future home. In deference to eastern notions of female modesty each palanquin was closely veiled in a thick red screen to shield its inmate from unholy gaze. The sentry saluted this rather unwieldy escort of the Rānee and fell back at a respectful distance. The procession halted when the only page riding by the side of the Rānee's litter went up to the Emperor, and giving him greetings on behalf of his royal mistress prayed that she might be allowed to have a last look at her husband before he would be finally released from captivity and sent back to Chitor.

XIV

Alauddin could not be so unchivalrous as to refuse such a reasonable prayer of such a lovely woman. So, the litter of Rānee Padmini was separated from the main body and taken to where Rānā Bhim Singha was anxiously watching the turn of events. This last interview

between the husband and the wife was permitted to be a private one, and the sentry were out of hearing distance. The screen of the litter parted, and the Rānā, to his great astonishment, found the young hero Bādal inside, instead of his queen. A glance explained the situation, and quick as lightning the Rānā sprang upon the back of the horse that the page had ridden, and leaving the thing to be managed by Bādal shot away towards Chitor to defend it against any immediate attack.



XV

The action of the Rānā in galloping full speed towards Chitor without caring either to say good-bye to the Emperor or to wait for an escort roused the suspicion of the sentry. But before he could sound the alarm, the whole Mahomedan camp had been thrown into confusion. For, about four thousand Rājput soldiers in two batches under Gorā and Bādal were advancing upon the Pathan positions from different directions. The duped Khilji found no Padmini, no maids-of-honour,—nothing of the kind. Each palanquin had two rough-looking, grey-bearded Rājput warriors instead, carried by four

comrades-in-arms. Treachery was paid back in its own coin !

XVI

Hopelessly disconcerted, Alauddin swore a mighty oath that shook the fort of Chitor to its foundation. Caught in the meshes of a woman's snare he trembled with rage from head to foot, and ordered Kafur to fight the infidels to death or victory. Loud and long the battle raged from point to point, and the Hindus now and the Pathans next seemed to gain the mastery of the field. The forces of destruction were let loose all at once on the plains before Chitor that day, and the red-eyed Demon of Slaughter, sleeping for some months past the sleep of inaction, now awoke to have his fill of unrestrained carnage. Gorā fought as no Rājput had ever fought before ; he was more than the proverbial host in himself. The clang of his sword was the knell of doom ; the Pathan troops quelled in his presence as a flock of sheep would shake in the jaws of the wolf.

But the Rājput "Forlorn Hope" was outnumbered—as Gorā knew they would be,—and there was only a quarter of the gallant four thousand left, still fighting heroically in a ring

round their beloved Commander. When the Hindus stood on the brink of annihilation, the Pathan General charged this knot of brave fighters with five hundred lances. Gorā made a desperate dash against the Mahomedan lancers, and killing as many of them as he could, fell, pierced through the heart like a hero in defending the arms and honour of a people.

XVII

Now came the turn of the lad Bādal whose heroic exploits will enrich Rājput minstrelsy so long as it will last. He had five hundred men yet left to follow him to death : these determined to leave an imperishable mark in the annals of Rājput India before they would join the congress of departed heroes.

So, the combat deepened again, and the warrior-spirit of the whole Rājput race became concentrated in the young leader of this heroic band. This unequal combat was continued by Bādal against immense odds till the darkness of evening was about to close round the Pathan camp, now almost sure of victory,—when succour came to that brave Rājput lad from an unexpected quarter and decided the fate of the day. A large body of the neighbouring friendly hillmen

swooped down from behind the field and fell upon the Pathan camp in a dashing charge, throwing everything into disorder. The troops of Alauddin fled pell-mell in a sudden fright, and before the evening stars went out of sight, the siege of Chitor had been raised and a solitary camel found galloping across the sands of Ajmere. The disappointed Khilji Emperor was on his way home to Imperial Delhi.

:

XVIII

Twelve long years passed over the plains and hills of Mewār, and the story of the wooing of Alauddin Khilji and his hasty retreat was sung in minstrel verse from house to house in Rājasthān. Though the Guzerāt rebellion was checked and large additions made to the empire of the Khilji Emperor, his humiliation at the hands of the Rājputs was rankling sore in his heart. That the great Emperor of Delhi was outwitted by a lady was what preyed so heavily on his mind. He passed all these years in restlessness and brooded over revenge. Accordingly when he was comparatively free from the worry of restoring order in the kingdom, he turned his attention to solve the Mewār question once for all. Now Padmini loomed large in his mind's eye, and he

made preparations this time on a vast scale to invade Mewār from as many directions at a time as the strength of the Imperial army would allow. There was no mistake, no half-heartedness. They would win or die on the sands of Rājputānā, for the prestige of an Empire was at stake. So, one morning when the spring was yet a few weeks old, Mewār heard the Mahomedan war-cry, and Chitor was besieged simultaneously from north and south, and east and west.

XIX

Mewār was not unprepared for this tremendous blow from Delhi; so she met her enemy half-way. There was a vigorous offensive from the Imperial troops; the Rājputs put up a stout resistance. It was a long-protracted campaign, and Rājput history has characterised it as a crisis in the life-story of a brave nation. The savage ferocity of the attacks was only equalled by the obstinacy of the defence. The whole of Mewār was up in arms against the enemy to expel him from the sacred domains he had invaded. Each of the twelve sons of Rānā Lakshman Singha took the field and, after rendering a very good account of himself in that memorable struggle

between might and right died the glorious death of a hero in the defence of the Motherland. But though so much precious blood was lost and Chitor became stripped of her heroes, the result of the campaign was plain to anticipate. Mewār could not hold out for more than two weeks.

Rānee Padmini shuddered to think of the consequence of Alauddin's revenge. She cursed the day on which she was born ; she cursed her ill-fated beauty that brought ruin upon Chitor. As a type of Rājput womanhood she did not care to face death, but she feared to face the terrors of a living death, an ignoble life of dishonour, when all that was honourable was passing away. She saw the fate of Chitor with her mind's eye, and large drops of tear ran down her care-worn cheeks, not that she became faint-hearted before death, but that the enemy would enter Chitor and "talk lightly" of the heroes that would be dead by that time and would not care to take up the challenge.

XX

The situation did not improve, and the fall of Chitor now became a question of hours. Provisions, fodder and water had already become exhausted, and three-fourths of the garrison killed. It was not, however, in the nature of

the Rājputs to yield. They did not grieve that they were going to their death; they had the satisfaction that they would not surrender. They died with satisfaction that no polluted hand could touch the 'Lotus of Mewār.' Heroic Mewār cared neither for land, nor palaces, nor wealth. The brave men and women of Rājputāna did not set much store by a few years more of life on this earth. They valued only one thing, and that was *honour* which they defended to the last. Padmini valued her honour more than her life, and her honour she defended while there was life in her. The glare of the Imperial harem was trash in her eyes to the vow of true love she had taken to the lord of her heart. When the last ray of the hope to save Chitor except by an unconditional surrender to the Mahomedan was gone, Rānee Padmini with her ladies consulted the tutelary Oracle of the royal family, and was told that the time was come when she should make the supreme sacrifice to save her honour. So Padmini requested the family priest to arrange for the terrible rite of *Johur** when night would fall.

* This refers to a very tragic custom that prevailed among the Rājputs in Medieval India. When there was no chance of saving the women and children from falling into the hands of the

XXI

The news ran through Chitor like wild fire and electrified her whole frame. It was a great day in her history, for, though this supreme act of devotion would give her immortality through ages unborn, it requires the strongest nerve to face the situation. Not one or two, but *all* must play out their part in this great self-imposed tragedy of the nation. No wavering,—no shrinking back,—no dishonouring the Rājput name. That was not their training. Not a single soul faltered. Padmini and her women were taking only a few hours' start to wait for their beloved at the portals of heaven.

Long before the first streaks of the dawn appeared on the eastern horizon, a huge funeral pyre of sandal-wood had been erected in a dark cavern by the foot of the hill below the fortress of Chitor, and basinfuls of clarified butter thrown into it to feed the flames. The priests chanted the sacred texts, worshipped the pile with due ceremony, threw into it the jewelleries worn by

Mahomedan conquerors, a huge funeral pyre was made, and the women, old and young, with their children, flung themselves readily into it and made an end of themselves. Then men rushed out and charged the overwhelming numbers of the enemy to victory or death.

the ladies, and the flames leapt up with ten thousand tongues. The next moment Chitor saw a memorable sight, painful to record for the tragic element it involved. Far surpassing in loveliness the "rosy-fingered Eos" conceived by the poet's imagination, Rānee Padmini, the far-famed 'Lotus of Mewar', leading all the women of Chitor in a huge procession, attired in the sacred saffron of hermit-women, singing a doleful song that would have no ending, came on with steady steps towards the pile and halted by the brink of the yawning abyss. They looked once at the infinite sky above their heads; they cast a last longing glance at dear Chitor and all that it contained, and with the blessings of the priests sanctifying their march into an unknown land, sprang headlong into the flames beneath.

A few thuds and a crash, and it was all over. Not a single Rājput woman was left alive in Chitor that morning. Then the main gate of the fort was flung wide open, and the brave men of Mewār headed by Mahārānā Lakshman Singha, Rānā Bhim Singha, and young Bādal rushed out in a solid mass against the besieging troops of Imperial Delhi, and fought with the courage of despair. It was an unequal combat, and though the two thousand Rājput heroes did prodigies of

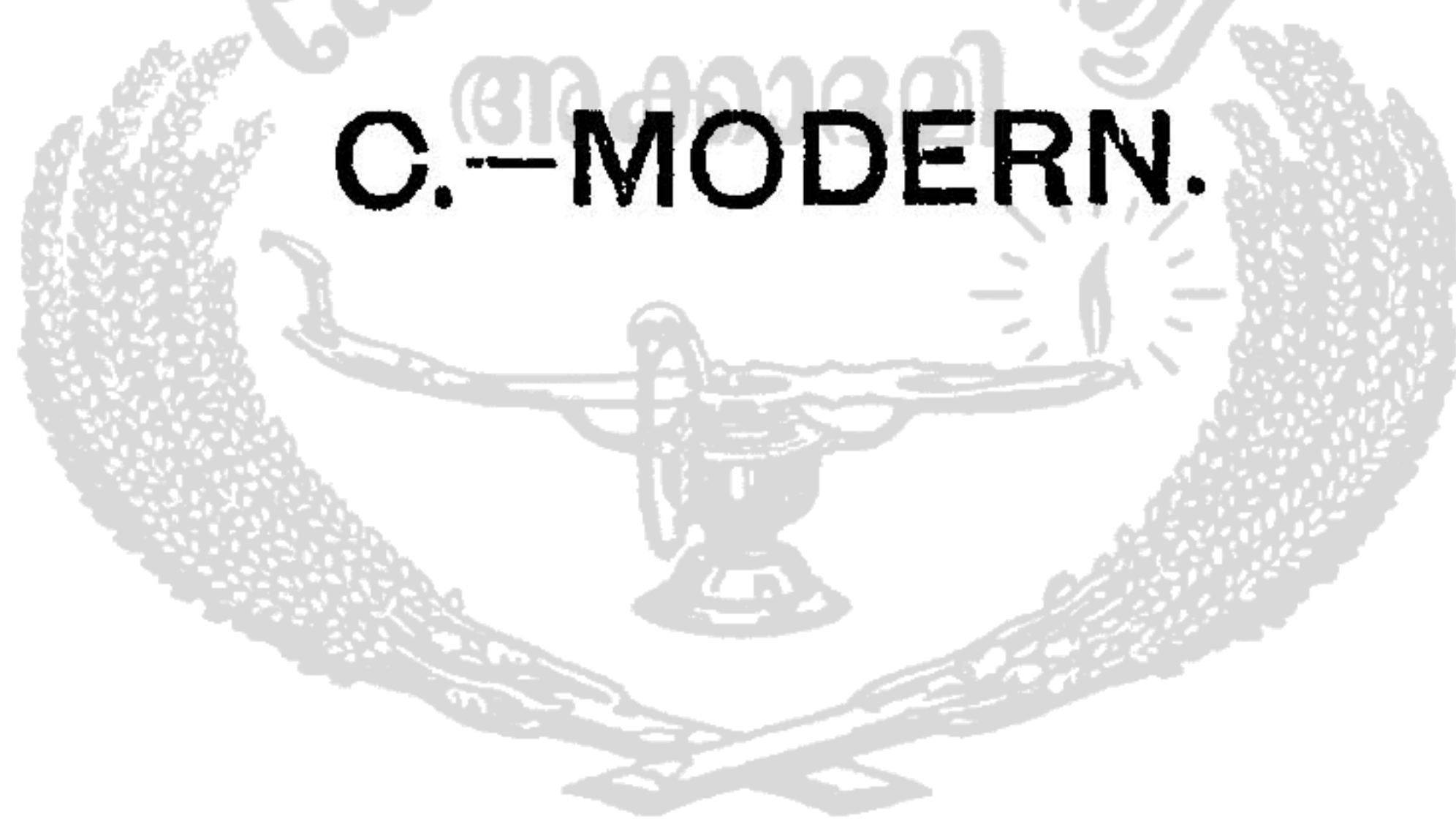
valour, they were like drops in the ocean of the vast Moslem army, and like bubbles they disappeared in that boundless ocean.

XXII

The Khilzi Emperor entered Chitor with all the pride of a conquering hero. In the exultation of the moment that he had at last attained the cherished desire of his heart, he led his men through the deserted streets of the fallen city towards the palace of Rānee Padmini. But to his utter dismay the palace wore an abandoned look. He made his way into the interior of the building, and shouted by the name of his lovely bride,—but nobody answered, and the echoes died away. The Imperial guards searched every nook and corner of the city, but they met no living soul, not to speak of the beautiful Rānee. At last they came upon that terrible abyss of destruction and discovered the charred remains of the women of Chitor who had preferred death to dishonour. Alāuddin hurried to the spot and understood the thing at a glance. Dismissing his soldiers the humbled monarch sat down by the brink to ponder.

Baffled again by a woman's wit! It was destiny, and even the Emperor of Delhi could not rise above it.

IV.—THE HISTORIC CYCLE.
C.—MODERN.



CHĀND SULTĀNĀ.

(PATRIOTISM).

I

The life-story of this Mahomedan lady is of immense interest to students of Indian history. Her valour, patriotism and statesmanship profoundly influenced the politics of Southern India in the sixteenth century, and formed the subjects of many fabulous stories. Fable or no fable, it goes without saying that hers was a towering personality ; and, in the words of a great Scotchman, Chānd Sultānā “still lives in Deccan story, and Deccan song, a heroine unrivalled.”*

II

In the early forties of the sixteenth century, Sultān Hussain Nizām Shāh was reigning with all the pomp of an independent Oriental Chief in the kingdom of Ahmadnagar. Three of his

* Captain James Grant-Duff in his “History of the Marhattas” Vol I. P. 73.

children, Prince Murtezā, Prince Burhān and Princess Chānd Bibi have come in for a good share of the historian's notice, and have occupied many pages of contemporary Deccan history ; and the greatest share has been allotted to the daughter Chānd Bibi, better known as Chānd Sultānā. She was born in 1548, and though she was bred in the luxuries of an Oriental Court, her old nurse Fatimā did not neglect to bring her up in the ways of piety and truth. The influence of this early training in religion and piety was noticeable throughout her life. Her imagination was profusely fed on the rich traditions of Islam, and of the kings, her ancestors, the illustrious founders of the Nizām Shāhi dynasty in the Deccan. The constant company of her brothers and of her father's ministers gave her a clear insight into the business of the State. It is no wonder, therefore, that with this sort of practical training from a very early age, she was eminently fitted for the position of trust and responsibility, which she held so successfully in after years, when the Deccan was seething with court-intrigue and political unrest. Thus we find why the historian Ferishtā has taken the trouble to record the glowing testimony to her patriotic fervour so ungrudgingly paid by her greatest

antagonist, Prince Murād, who was sent to reduce her by Akbar the Great of Delhi.

III

Sultān Hussain Nizām Shāh was watching the growth of his playful daughter with a laudable amount of paternal solicitude. Retiring from the cares of an onerous duty in the evening, the Sultān would find greater solace in the sweet prattle of his darling child than in the voluptuous strain of music from the beautiful dancing girls of the Court. In the delicately formed features of his daughter the father discovered a striking resemblance to those of her mother, the departed Sultānā, whose loss weighed heavily on the old king's mind. The girl was the Sultānā's only solace in a cheerless home, his balm of Gilead to heal a rankling sore.

Her beauty and accomplishments were an attraction to the highest aristocratic circles in the land. Guess after guess was hazarded among the nobles of the Court as to who would win the lovely maiden of Ahmadnagar. The knights far and near were ready to fight over the wagers they laid. But Hussain Nizām Shāh set idle tongues at rest by proclaiming his royal wish that the princess was to marry Ali Adil Shāh,

the young king of Bijāpur. People said it was a political marriage ; for an alliance had recently been formed between the two States against the Rājā of the Carnatic ; and the union between Chānd Bibi and Ali Adil Shāh cemented that alliance.

IV

Whatever might be the motives, political or otherwise, that induced Hussain Nizām Shāh to bestow the hand of his beloved daughter upon the young king of Bijāpur, the marriage proved a very happy one. Ali Adil Shāh was devotedly attached to his lovely bride, whose rare beauty and rarer accomplishments justified her claim to be reckoned the finest pearl among contemporary Indian women. Day after day a fine trait was discovered in her character, and her influence became a powerful silent factor in shaping the policy of the young Sultān in the affairs of the State. The turbulent nobles of the Court ceased for the time to fight among themselves ; the money hitherto squandered by the Court in hunting, gambling and other frivolous pursuits was diverted to useful channels ; regular prayers were offered in the mosques of the city, and alms distributed to the poor ; learned Maulānās held

religious discourses at stated periods of the day ; Kāzis dealt out equal justice to the rich and the poor alike ; and the all-round prosperity of Bijāpur during the reign of Ali Adil Shāh recalled the days of the great Haroun-ul-Raschid of an almost forgotten age. "All this," says the historian Ferishtā,* "was due to the sobering influence of Chānd Sultānā over the reckless youth who wielded the destinies of the kingdom of Bijāpur, while Akbar the Great was consolidating his empire in the north."

V

But Providence ordained otherwise, and Bijāpur fell on evil days. The sudden death of Ali Adil Shāh in 1580 left Chānd Bibi a childless widow at thirty-two. Anarchy and confusion returned to the woe-begone kingdom. The unruly nobles now freed from superior control, each led a faction to seize the Sovereign authority. In the internecine strife that followed, blood flowed freely in the streets of Bijāpur, now a scene of violence and lawlessness. The tact and courage of Chānd Sultānā saved the situation for some time yet ; a regency was set up on behalf of Ibrāhim, a minor nephew of

* Quoted by Elphinstone in his History of India.

the late Sultān, and the wisdom of the lady poured oil on the agitated waters of Bijāpur politics. But it was only a lull preceding a storm. Dark clouds were lowering over the political horizon of Bijāpur. The nobles were hopelessly divided against one another, and their spirit rebelled against the authority of a woman. Taking advantage of this intestine disorder in the State, the sister kingdoms of Golkondā, Bidar and Ahmadnagar combined against it, and the walls of Bijāpur felt the charge of the battering tuskers of her unfriendly neighbours.

VI

Then followed a scene of tumult in the Bijāpur capital. While the Regent was busy devising measures for the safety of the minor prince, and for standing a sustained siege in case of need, the generals were wrangling over their clashing interests. Chānd Bibi saw that no efforts could possibly save the doomed city unless the nobles of the Court and the army stood faithfully by the Royal House. So, the first endeavour of the lady was directed towards conciliating the army ; her next, to rally the refractory nobles by pointing out to them where their real interest lay. She made a passionate appeal to

the better mind of the classes and the masses in a final attempt to eliminate the poison of disunion that was eating into the vitals of the State : her tactics were as equally effective here as when, in the dark days of the Armada in England, the Virgin Queen threw herself unreservedly upon the good sense of the English people.

VII

“My brethren,” ran her eloquent appeal, “Bijāpur is passing through a grave crisis that threatens her very existence. After the death of my husband, the late Sultān, the government of the kingdom passed into the hands of an infant boy. Finding a weak woman at the helm of affairs, the nobles are fighting among themselves to seize the Sovereign power. The army is disaffected, and the kingdom is showing all the symptoms of decay and collapse. This has offered a golden opportunity to our hostile neighbours. The result is that we hear the war-bugle of the enemy beyond our gates.

“But rest assured, friends, that with the fall of Bijāpur you lose the freedom you have enjoyed for generations under the paternal care of a benign Government. Your honour will be desecrated ; your women and children given up

to the swords of the conquerors. You will bow down to the spears of a superior enemy force, and be the hewers of wood and drawers of water of an unkind enemy Government.

“Is this the time, my friends, to wrangle over your personal grievances? Is this the time to betray your country by standing aloof from the struggle? Ask your conscience, and you will get the reply. I appeal to the army to fight for the honour of the nation. I appeal to the nobles on behalf of the minor Sultān to sink all their differences at this hour of the country's trial; I appeal to the masses to decide the question and choose between the alternatives, Freedom or Slavery. It is the voice of the woman, but it is the prudence of the man that speaks through it. The free man fights the enemy of his country first, and settles his personal disputes next. Am I right or am I wrong?”

VIII

The appeal of Chānd Bibi was miraculous in its effect. The nobles forgot their jealousies and shook hands with one another. The army rose to the full height of its strength. The leaders vied with one another in devising measures for the defence of the city. The troops

worked day and night under the personal supervision of the Regent. Her tact and courage inspired everybody. Without minding her personal comfort or safety she exposed herself to the greatest risks, and the valiant troops of Bijāpur, emboldened by the example of the lady, rushed out of the city, fell upon the besiegers and inflicted on them a crushing defeat. The name of Chānd Sultānā became a terror to the invading troops who fled pell-mell in all directions. Orleans was repeated in India, and the siege of Bijāpur was raised (1583).

IX

But it did not fall to the lot of the lady to enjoy domestic peace for any length of time. The patched-up truce with the nobles did not last long, and before the year was out and the city could recover from the shock of the recent outrage, faction had reared its head and the country had been thrown into the vortex of a civil war. To add to her miseries, her charge, the young Sultān, was now grown to man's stature and hankered after man's privileges. He hated the prospect of his perpetual tutelage; he grew, moreover, to dislike the authority of a woman, forgetting entirely the extent of his in-

debtedness to his benefactress. So, to the intense joy of his friends and the boundless surprise of the Regent, young Ibrāhim Shāh announced one day in open Durbār that he had taken the reins of Government into his own hands. Chānd Sultānā felt greatly mortified at the conduct of her ward. She could ill brook the humiliation, but she left Bijāpur for shelter under the paternal roof at Ahmadnagar with tears at the helplessness of the young Sultān.

X

So, Chānd Sultānā came back to Ahmadnagar where her brother Murtezā Nizām Shāh was reigning in his father's stead. She came to rest in the peaceful shelter of the paternal roof, but she was disappointed. She found Ahmadnagar a prey to greater internal disorder than what she had left behind at Bijāpur. In fact, each Decan monarchy was, at the close of the sixteenth century, in a state of intestine paralysis which tempted its subversion by the ambitious Emperor of Delhi. Murtezā Nizām Shāh was killed by his own son Meerun. But this unlucky prince did not live long to enjoy his eminence. Patricide was paid back in its own coin, and in a few months' time Meerun fell pierced by the

regicide dagger of a refractory noble. Anarchy reigned supreme in Ahmadnagar.

While these events were happening in Ahmadnagar, and the roll of murders swelling from day to day, Prince Burhān, another brother of Chānd Bibi, hitherto living under Akbar's protection, welcomed the opportunity and wrested possession of his hereditary kingdom. Chānd Bibi heaved a great sigh of relief at the success of her brother. But Ahmadnagar seemed to be under a divine curse and troubles were not to cease there so easily. The hapless new Sultān died after a short reign, and though the vacant throne was occupied by his infant son Ibrāhim, the distractions increased, and in 1595 "there were no less than four parties in the field, each supporting a separate claimant."* Ibrāhim was killed in an action with the Bijāpur troops; and Ahmadnagar, left without a central government at this crisis, drifted on to a complete political collapse.

XI

But Chānd Sultānā could no longer look upon this state of things with the eye of an indifferent spectator. She understood that her

* Eiphistone's History of India, IX. 2, P. 511.

active participation in this internal dispute would disturb her rest. But this prospect of eternal bloodshed involving a perpetual threat to the security of the subjects was revolting to her nature, and utterly disgusted at the state of the anarchy prevailing she resolved to improvise some sort of a government, popular and efficient in its character. Led by the best of patriotic motives she raised the minor son of Ibrāhim to the throne, and called him Bāhādur Nizām Shāh. She acted as the Regent, and her vigorous supervision soon created order out of the existing chaos. The capital was now in her hands; the army obeyed her commands, and the administration felt the stamp of her strong hands. But the leader* of the Hindu faction, whom the lady failed to conciliate, invited the interference of Delhi. It only added fuel to the fire of Akbar's ambition, and the plains and fields of Ahmadnagar immediately rang with the clang of Moghul swords (1596).

XII

Two Moghul armies led respectively by Prince Murād and Khān Khānān Mirzā Khān entered the Deccan, one by the way of Guzerāt

* Of this Hindu called Mean Rajoo by Ferishta Captain Grant-Duff has had no satisfactory account.

from the west and the other by the way of Mālhwā from the north and effected a junction a few miles from Ahmadnagar. No sooner did Chānd Sultānā smell danger ahead than she, with all the wisdom of a clever statesman, made vigorous preparations for the defence of the city. She appealed to the leaders of the Abyssinian faction, Ikhlās Khān and Nehāng Khān, who put off their private animosities and promised their loyal support; and though the old Vizir, Miān Majlis, chief of the Deccani faction, who had long been suspected of complicity in the Moghul conspiracy, could not be brought over, the whole of the Ahmadnagar army stood faithfully by the infant Sultān whose salt they were eating. Then Chānd Sultānā sent a fervent appeal to the reigning Sultān of Bijāpur who was her relation, and whose regard for the Dowager Sultānā bordered on veneration. "The Moghul danger to Ahmadnagar," she wrote to her nephew of Bijāpur, "is no less a danger to her Adil Shāhi neighbour. The fall of one will spell the doom of the other; for the crafty Moghul acts on the principle "one stick at a time, and the bundle will break." The king of Bijāpur understood the hint, and forgetting old differences, made common cause with Ahmad-

nagar against the projected Moghul expedition. He sent 30,000 of his picked troops under the command of Hāmid Khān, the most skilful general that Bijāpur could boast of. Thus setting her home in order, the patriotic lady held herself ready to try her strength against Imperial Delhi.

XIII

Ahmadnagar lay besieged by the trained troops of Delhi. Two mines were run under its walls, and the Moghuls expected every moment to effect a breach wide enough to admit them into the fort. But the wakeful sentry on the ramparts somehow discovered the mines and sounded the bugle of alarm. In the twinkling of an eye the unwearied Sultānā, clad in full armour and with a veil on her face, appeared on the spot. She came to superintend her own workmen. Encouraged by her presence they ran to their task with a resolute will, and rendered the mines useless by countermining according to the directions of Chānd Sultānā. The baffled Mirzā Khān was furious. The best of Akbar's generals had yet to learn a lesson from a woman!

Chānd Sultānā now became the mark of the enemy's gun. Matchlock balls and arrows whiz-

zed past her ears ; and though her comrades were dropping dead around her, heap upon heap, she did not shrink from her post. She directed her men like the best of captains, making it very difficult for the Moghul troops to gain their object. But there was a third mine run by Prince Murād whose troops fired it before the Sultānā's men could do anything to make it ineffectual. The counterminers were blown up to a man, and, with all that the lady could do a wide breach was made in the wall.

XIV

Behold ! a panic seizes the defenders. They desert their posts. They show no resistance, and leave the road open to the storming party. The Nizām Shāhi troops are falling back. But instantly they hear the encouraging voice of Chānd Sultānā, more effective than the terrible boom of the Moghul gun. "Friends," the voice rings clearly in their ears, "valiant troops of Ahmad-nagar, brave men of Bijāpur, is life so worth living after showing your backs to your enemies ? Are these days so different from those of Hussain Nizām Shāh and Ali Adil Shāh when honour was dearer than the life of a coward ? If you cannot live to defend your country, know at least

to live by dying in the attempt. Who among you wants eternal life in death? Who wants to cover, for eternal ages, his name, fame and life in the holy dust of the motherland? If there be any such among you, soldiers of the Deccan,—come, this is the golden opportunity of doing and dying for the motherland.”—So saying, Chānd Sultānā rushes headlong into the thickest of the fight, with a naked sword in her hand. The retreating soldiers of Ahmadnagar turn back and follow the Queen into the jaws of death. They raise a tremendous shout in the name of their Queen, and rush to the charge. They kill the advancing guards of the enemy, and fill up the ditches with rockets, gunpowder, match-lock balls and every sort of combustible ready to be fired. The Moghul troops fight desperately till it is dark, and retire to renew the assault in the morning.

XV

The contest was long and bloody, and the enemy drew off, disputing every inch of ground and leaving a large number of their comrades slain before the ramparts of Ahmadnagar. The casualties of the besieged rose to a pretty round number, and thin as their ranks grew, they knew that the turn of those yet living was coming

next morning to follow those who had gone to their eternal rest. They knew well that Prince Murād and the Khān Khānān had granted them only a temporary cessation of hostilities; the life-and-death combat was still to follow. But the troops were not demoralised. The presence of the Sultānā was an inspiration to them. The spirit of the army was raised to the highest pitch, and enthusiasm in the city was boundless. Chānd Sultānā now directed all her energies to repair the breach; for, very soon, the issue of the battle would be decided on that fatal spot. The work proceeded rapidly, as everything now depended on speed; and before the great gong in the clock tower boomed the hour of midnight, the breach had been thoroughly repaired to a height not accessible to any scaling party without the aid of a fresh mine. When morning dawned and the Moghul troops hurried to deliver their postponed assault, what was their surprise to find the breach built up! To add to this, they found the veiled figure of Chānd Sultānā standing sentry on the walls close to the repairs that had been newly done.

XVI

The troops of Mirzā Khān were painfully aware of the sharpness of the Queen's sword.

Her very name was disheartening to them. The inevitable result of the panic was shrewdly guessed by Shāhzādā Murād who agreed with Mirzā Khān that it was prudent to avoid the risk of an immediate engagement. They therefore opened negotiations.

To Chānd Sultānā this sudden climb-down of the Moghuls was quite unexpected. However, she embraced the opportunity of making up with the formidable superior force of an obstinate enemy without any further sacrifice of heroic blood. She knew, moreover, that the combination among the Ahmadnagar nobles could not last long. They would fly at one another's throat at the earliest opportunity, and Ahmadnagar politics would drift on to chaos again. So, from the best of motives Chānd Sultānā came to terms with the enemy by surrendering the claim of Bahādur Nizām Shāh on the recently conquered province of Berār (1596). The clang of hostile swords in the Ahmadnagar territory ceased for some time.

XVII

But domestic trouble was brewing again in the land, and the nobles, with their eyes open, were digging their own graves. They did not allow

a year to lapse ; and while the Shāhzādā was yet engaged in settling the boundary disputes of his recent acquisition, messengers rode post-haste to the Moghul headquarters with a letter from Muhāmmad Khān, a refractory baron instigated by the Vizir. The treasonable correspondence showed the nature of the plot that was made : the capital was to be betrayed into the hands of the enemy as soon as the royal army would arrive. Khāndesh joined the Moghuls ; Bijāpur, Golcondā and Ahmadnagar formed the Deccan combination. Mirzā Khān did not forget his recent humiliation at the hands of Chānd Sultānā ; so the Moghul commander gladly entered into the conspiracy, and hostilities were at once resumed. The Delhi and Deccani troops met again in a trial of strength on the banks of the Godāvari. For a couple of days the battle raged with equal fury on both sides. The Deccani troops accepted the lead of Chānd Sultānā and obeyed her to death : there was division in the Moghul camp, and Shāhzādā fell out with the Khān Khānān on material points. The result was indecisive,—and the royal troops, instead of pushing on the victory which they claimed, fell back behind the dense forests on the Godāvari.

XVIII

The news of the ill success against the Deccan confederacy reached the ears of the Great Akbar. A shrewd statesman that he was, Akbar sent his minister Abul Fazl to investigate into the affair. His report revealed a state of hopeless disagreement between Prince Murād and Mirzā Khān. Akbar removed both of them from the command and himself took the field to measure his strength against the Deccan combination.* Prince Dāniyāl accompanied his father in charge of the artillery ; the army was re-inforced by the addition of large contingents of infantry and horse. The presence of the Emperor revived the drooping spirits of the Moghul army. The troops fought with greater confidence than before, and fort after fort fell before the conquering sword of Akbar. With forced marches the royal army reached the borders of the Ahmadnagar territory and halted on the banks of the Tāpti. From there a considerable force was sent in advance under Prince Dāniyāl to lay siege to Ahmadnagar, and the Emperor followed with all despatch.

* Elphinstone, IX. 2. P. 513.

XIX

The Deccan confederacy was paralysed. But harm was done to the strength of the allied opposition by internal feuds rather than by any external factors. Bijāpur stood faithfully by Ahmadnagar in these dark days. But treason was at work,—and no kingdom can stand where treachery does its worst. Nehāng Khān, the Abyssinian noble, deserted Chānd Sultānā at the approach of the Imperial troops. Muhāmmad Khān was ready to feed fat his ancient grudge. The Vizir was relentless. Fate was going against Chānd Sultānā, and no human power could avert the course of a setting star.

The Regent understood her precarious position. She understood that love of country was a meaningless phrase with the nobles of Ahmadnagar whose hearts were impervious to any emotion higher than the love of self. She found it a hopeless task to reconcile the Abyssinian faction whose soul was dead to any sentiment of patriotism. Yet she kept her ideal well within sight. With tears in her eyes she implored the Vizir to save the country in the greatest crisis of her existence ; not even a savage beast, she said, would betray its lair to the enemy. But the

appeal fell flat on the unsympathetic heart. There was nothing for her now but to die for the country she loved so well.

XX

But she must make a final attempt to save her motherland. If she has to die, she will die like a soldier at his post. So, while the Moghul cannon are booming round the city, and shot and shell are falling fast and thick on the streets of Ahmadnagar, the heroic Sultānā leads the handful of her loyal adherents to where Akbar himself is directing the sally against the walls of the fortress. She is glad that she faces an adversary like the Great Akbar : she is only sorry that she has to meet enemy in front and treason behind, that she is numerically inferior, and that her shot is expended. She encourages her men who cheer her name and follow her with greater confidence than ever. The sword in her hand inflicts death on all who attempt a passage through the walls. But her guns are silenced for want of shot : she fires copper balls into the Moghul camp. Then she loads her guns with silver and gold coins by turns, and ends by firing away the jewels in the royal treasury.*

* Mentioned by Khāfi Khān—Vide F. N. 11. Chap. IX. 2. Elphinstone.

Akbar Shāh is struck dumb in mute admiration. In his whole campaigning life this is perhaps the first instance when he meets an opposition of this nature. Stern as he is as a leader of men, the great soldier king of Moghul India is too magnanimous to pass heroism unnoticed. While his men are eager to push on and make an end of the lady who bears a charmed life, the sword in Akbar's right hand rises automatically to his broad forehead in a military salute, and he cries 'halt' to his followers. In the twinkling of an eye the battle ceases, and the Emperor himself shows a small white flag—the flag of truce.

The Sultānā kneels and returns the salute. She leads back her men and retires to her apartments to think of a future course of action.

XXI

It was a fatal step that she took. The troops could not restrain their enthusiasm, and were furious that they had been called back at what seemed to them to be the moment of victory. The Vizir's party anticipating that their object would be lost if the Sultānā were allowed to come to terms with Akbar, made capital out of the incident narrated above. They

convinced the army that the Regent had betrayed the motherland and should get the traitor's due. The illiterate soldiery, excited beyond measure at the appeal, throwing all reason and moderation to the winds, burst into the Sultānā's apartments, and before she could open her lips to explain the situation, the Arch-fiend Muhāmmad Khān had plunged his murderous knife up to the hilt into her bosom (1600). Thus expired Chānd Sultānā, as the Great Cæsar did of old, at the moment when the most favourable terms for the safety of Ahmadnagar could be secured from the generous Akbar. But who could save a country under the curse of God ?

The great Bādshāh shuddered at the news, and, for once, his stern soldier's heart seemed to break. Without waiting for a minute his troops broke into the capital, and when treason had been duly rewarded, they sought out the lifeless corpse of Chānd Sultānā and gave her the honours of a military burial befitting the rank of the greatest General in the land.

DURGĀBATI.

(LOVE OF COUNTRY).

I

In a narrow defile in the Central Provinces, about twenty miles below Jubbulpore and on the right bank of the Narmadā, there is a lonely spot not much noticed in these days ; yet the inquisitive student of history will still feel in that neglected region the aroma of a thrilling romance to interest him deeply in a bygone age of chivalry. The solitary wayfarer rests in his journey between two large slabs of rock. The simple-minded peasant boy brings him a refreshing draught from a hospitable spring close by. He then unfolds with evident pride and satisfaction the locally current tradition that this is the hallowed spot where the heroic Rājput Queen Durgābati laid down her life in the vindication of her self-respect and for the honour of her people. The rocks, says

the tradition, are the battle drum of Queen Durgābati (a strange metamorphosis!) standing still to bear eternal testimony to an Indian woman's valour and patriotism.

II

Who was this Durgābati? Let me tell you. Here is a tale of an Indian lady's fortitude and self-sacrifice in the cause of the freedom of her country.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Akbar the Great was engaged in his campaign of conquests and annexations with a view to rebuild the history of Hindusthān. When kingdom after kingdom in Northern India was bowing in quick succession before the fluttering Crescent of Imperial Delhi, and singing the praises of the greatest Moghul Bādshāh India has ever known, a small settlement of a hardy Rājput clan, nestled in the bosom of the Deccan mountains, enjoyed its freedom unmolested. Rānee Durgābati was administering her little property of Gondwānā on behalf of her minor son Beernārāin, and her ability challenged the exultant war drum of the conquering Moghul hero beating perilously near the gates of her small kingdom. The flourishing city of Garh-

mandal came in for its due share of attention from Akbar.

III

Asaf Khān, the newly appointed Military Viceroy of the Emperor's possessions on the Narmadā, was a hot-headed Moslem general who had triumphantly led the banner of Islam against many a Hindu chief. The report of the prosperity of the neighbouring Hindu State reached his ears. He could not bear the idea that a petty Hindu principality under the protection of a weak and defenceless woman should so long defy the authority of Delhi while the Khān was eating the salt of Akbar the Great. Accordingly he set his heart upon the subjugation of idolatrous Gondwānā, and the pious wish received the assent of his Imperial Master. But Asaf Khān soon found to his bitter experience that he had a very hard nut to crack.

The report of the projected invasion reached the city of Garh in due course and alarmed the inoffensive, peace-loving inhabitants, unaccustomed to war for a very long period of time. But Rānee Durgābati would not submit tamely without striking a blow for freedom. Daughter of a brave Kshattriya chief, and mated to a still

more valorous Rājput prince, Durgābati had all the advantages of a soldier born and made. Her proud spirit rebelled against the thought of political extinction. She did not consider her sex, her age or her limited resources in men and money. Her self-respect and the honour of her people were at stake, and she would not throw these away at the behest of the haughty Moghul. She would fight the enemy of her people, the thief that wanted to rob her child of his birth-right, or perish in the attempt.

IV

Durgābati took counsel with her faithful minister and her boy Beernārāin, now grown up a fine young prince of eighteen. They agreed to give battle and orders were sent to raise an army. The "celestial fire" of the Rānee's exhortations and her own fearless conduct acted like a miracle at this juncture. In a very short time a fully equipped army was ready to take the field against the invading hordes of Asaf Khān. Every heart was filled with enthusiasm, every face bore the mark of determination to win or die. Theirs was the cause of justice and righteousness, and the holy cause could not lack support. The young prince

joined the army as a subordinate officer and the Queen herself offered to lead her men to battle. The army hailed this gladsome news with shouts of joy.

Asaf Khān soon realised that he had reckoned without the host. He did not anticipate the latest change in the position of affairs in the city of Garh. That his army would encounter opposition was beyond his calculation. He had given his Royal Master distinctly to understand that the capitulation of the city was merely a question of demand, and that no Mahomedan blood would be shed in reducing the infidel Rānee. He wanted, moreover, a large part of his available forces in maintaining order in the newly acquired territories and had not, therefore, many hands to spare at present. So he sent for a draft of men, and resorted, in the meanwhile, to diplomacy.

V

One morning a trusted messenger on a black charger attended by an escort of only two Moghul troopers, crossed to the other bank of the Narmadā and galloped post-haste up to the gates of the city of Garh. "We come from the Moghul camp," said the leader of the party,

“and crave the honour of an audience with the Rānee. Ours is an important mission that brooks no delay.” The leader was disarmed and led into the audience chamber of the palace. Seated behind a screen, the Queen desired the Moslem officer to say what motive had induced him to seek that interview. “If there be anything,” said the heroic lady, “that can be done to allay the unquenchable Moghul thirst for dominion, rest assured, my honoured friend, that the weak arms of a helpless woman will not be found wanting in their duty to send a soothing drink to the head-quarters.”

“I come, O Rānee, with the olive branch of peace, and I am instructed to offer my terms. If you think fit to acknowledge the supremacy of the Moghuls, the first condition is that the Prince, your son, should be made over to the fatherly protection of the Emperor Akbar to be retained as a hostage in his Court. The next condition is, that you should be guided by the wise counsels of the Viceroy in.....”

Before he had time to finish, the Queen stood erect, white with indignation.

“Our condition, bold Mahomedan,” she replied in a voice tremulous with emotion, “is that your master, whoever he may be, should

come here in person to demand of us the terms on which we are asked to sell the birth-right of a free people. Messenger, you are granted a safe conduct out of the fort, so that you may tell him that Rānee Durgābati values her self-respect and the honour of her people more than her personal safety. Our greetings to your General with whom we long for the honour of a meeting on the plains yonder."

The meeting came to an abrupt close and the message of the Rānee was duly communicated to His Excellency the Moghul Governor.

VI

In the Spring of 1564, two armies stood facing each other on the plains of Singhal Garh, a few miles from the city. Asaf Khān himself led the right wing of the Moghul army and came face to face with the heroic widow of Rājā Dalpat Shāh of Gondwana, herself leading the Rājput left. The battle commenced. The sword in the hand of Durgābati dealt destruction right and left among the enemy. Her stalwart frame, clad in a complete suit of mail, managing a white charger with the ease and grace of a born rider, struck terror into the hearts of the veterans of the Moghul army. The Rājput

infantry fought like demons. All the time the heroic Rānee was in the thick of the fight and though bleeding from several wounds she received from the shafts of the Moghul archers, her words were, "Forward, my brave boys, forward in the name of your country's honour." The Hindu cavalry that brought up the rear of the Rānee's forces now charged the Moghul centre and completed the rout.

VII

The Imperial army vanished like chaff before the wind. The men fled pell-mell leaving their dead and dying, and it was a difficult task for their Commander to rally them again to his standard. But Asaf Khān had set his heart upon the conquest of Garhmandal at any cost, and his recent reverse acted only as a spur to further exertions. Before the Hindu army could get a month's time to recover from the strain of the last encounter, the Mahomedan war-bugle sounded for the second time before the gates of the fortress of Durgābati. The Rānee was prepared for such an emergency, and with the alacrity of a veteran of many fields she gathered the men and came out to fight the foe on the open plain. Soon Rājputs and Turks closed in a deadly

combat, and with the neighing of horses, the trumpet of elephants, the war cries of men and the clang of clashing swords, with the groans of the dying and the corpses of the dead, the battle-field presented a gruesome aspect. It was a life-and-death struggle to the Khān; it was no less to the Rājput lady. But the Moghul had only might on his side, while the Rājput had might backed up by right. So Turk and Rājput fought, each to win or die, the one obstinately to maintain his prestige before the world and the other resolutely to defend his right as a free-born man. So the battle raged loud and long for the whole day, and the sun set over the fortunes of Islam that fell for the second time in this unequal match between a weak woman and a mighty king. The pride of the Mahomedan General again kissed the dust before the gates of the city of Garh. His army retreated in reduced strength and a weak *morale*.

VIII

The Rājput soldiers fought and covered themselves with glory. The small army, however, badly needed some rest and the Rānee gave her men the holiday they deserved so well. There were great rejoicings in the city. The

streets were illuminated and the houses on both sides presented a gala look with flags, festoons and floral wreaths. The *Nahabat* played the livelong day and sang the praises of Rānee Durgābati and her heroic band of warriors who had stoutly upheld the honour of Gondwana. The Rānee held a State Durbār and honoured the men who had rendered themselves conspicuous by their gallantry. Prince Beernārāin was, with one accord, singled out for the Captaincy of the Garhmandal army.

But this step proved fatal. Jealousy rankled sore in the hearts of some that were disappointed. Treason followed in its wake and worked the mischief that made Garhmandal fall never to rise again.

IX

It was a dark and stormy night. The Rānee retired to her chamber after saying her evening prayers, and taking her frugal supper of a cup of milk. The Prince was not yet in his bed. He was busy looking over some state accounts submitted late by the cashier of the Rāj. The sentry that mounted guard at the palace gate walked with a heavy and measured tread.

Suddenly the man espied a blazing torch by a breach in the southern wall of the city. There

was another and yet another. He raised the alarm. But before the inmates of the palace could half realize what had happened, a swarm of Moghul troopers forced their way into the courtyard and made short work with the half-awake guards at their posts. The Moghul van was led by a Hindu deserter who thought he was deprived of his legitimate honour of commanding the Rājput army.

The confusion in the palace grew worse every minute. The Rānee, however, did not lose the calm composure of her mind. Clad in her suit of armour, sword in hand, she hurried downstairs. She met the Prince on the steps and divided the command of the remaining fragment of her army between herself and her son.

In the *mélee*, Beernārāin met the treacherous deserter and dealt him the traitor's death. The fall of this villain created a panic among the Moghul soldiers, most of whom rushed to safety out of the fort. The Rānee and the Prince followed them outside the city and made a stand on the famous plains before Singhal Garh.

X

Meanwhile, a few of the Rānee's adherents gathered round her person and tried to dissuade

her from continuing this struggle against immense odds. With scorn she rejected their advice to seek safety in flight. She fought her way through the serried ranks of the Moghuls, led by Asaf Khān himself who was engaged by the Prince in another part of the field.

But the fortunes of the battle were going decidedly against the Rājputs. The Prince received a mortal wound from a Moghul lancer and fell on the field. At this heart-rending sight the Queen rushed on to where the Khān was directing his men and confronted him. The Mahomedan General cowered before her as before a lioness whose cub he had snatched away.

“Villain,” thundered forth the Queen, “valour I can fight single-handed, but not treason. Let not posterity say that the Queen of Gondwana could not die for her country while she had yet her sword to raise. Settle accounts with your conscience, coward, and prepare yourself for the traitor’s doom.” So saying, she dealt a heavy blow on the turbaned head of the Khān who had no time to parry it. He fell senseless in his saddle and his charger left the field with the prostrate body on his back. Just at this moment a shaft from an invisible hand struck the eye of Durgābati. While she was trying to take it out,

the spear of a Mahomedan pierced her through the heart and brought her to the ground. The flower of Rājput chivalry closed for ever.

XI

Thus perished Durgābati, the heroic Queen of Garhmandal in her attempt to save the honour of her people, to uphold the liberty of her country, against the sweeping onrush of a vastly superior enemy force. History tells us of the heroic peasant-maid of Domremy who raised the famous siege of Orleans. The English poet has sung in immortal verse of "the British warrior queen" who taught a lesson to the legions of Imperial Rome. But history does not tell us of this Indian Boadicea before whom quelled the mighty hosts of the great Moghul, flushed with the pride of recent victory in a very successful campaign in the North.

Durgābati is dead. Though history has accorded her a shabby treatment, she has richly deserved a place of honour in the Valhalla of nations' heroes.

MIRĀ BĀI.

(RELIGIOUS DEVOTION).

I

A very fine and well attended bridal procession halted before the palace gates of Merta in Rājputānā. The gay cavalcade sent its respectful obeisances to the Chief and was about to pass on.

“Who is that going, papa, seated on a throne?” enquired a pretty little child of six summers, who was carried outside in the arms of her nurse. Rājā Ratturbatia Rānā, for such was the name of the blessed father, the Chief of the palace, said in reply to the enquiring voice, “It is a bridegroom, my darling.” “Oh, I will have a bridegroom,” insisted the girl; and the fond father, bringing out a newly made statuette of Krishna, the god of the Vaishnavas, presented it to his girl Mirā, saying that it was the bridegroom she wanted. “Dress it well, feed it well and worship

it. Then your bridegroom will be happy." With these words the girl was dismissed. Thenceforth she looked after the image as she was asked to do. She dressed it in the richest velvet and adorned it with the most precious jewels that her royal parents could give her. It was her bridegroom.

II

• Thus, it is said, was sown the seed of piety in the tender heart of Mirā Bāi, when she was scarcely out of her cradle. The seed of Vaishnavism thus planted and fostered by her Vaishnava parents, afterwards grew into a large tree with spreading branches, that sheltered many a weary soul under its cool shade. It gave us an anchorite princess whose renunciation was not lighter than that of a Buddha or a Gaurāṅga.

Mirā grew up a beautiful princess, rich in the graces of her person and unrivalled in the charms of her mind. She had a sweet rich voice and it was like the music of the heavenly choir when she sang the Vaishnava hymns to the tune of her lute, and held her audience spell-bound. It was a little paradise on earth she created for herself and her parents. Years went on, and the fame of her beauty and accomplishments having reach-

ed the ears of Mukuldeo, Rānā of Mewar, she was claimed at fifteen as the bride of Kumbha, heir-apparent to the *guddee* of Mewar. The wedding was celebrated with right royal pomp in the midst of great popular rejoicings.

III

“What is it that you have brought with you from your father’s roof?” was the peremptory demand of Kumbha’s mother, when Mirā alighted from her closed palanquin at the entrance to the Rānā’s harem and took the dust of her mother-in-law’s feet.

“Why, it is my god Krishna, the lord of my heart,” replied the bride in the simplicity of her heart. “Then I may as well tell you at once that I will have none of your Vaishnava worship under my roof,” was the curt rejoinder of the Rānee, a devoted worshipper of Sakti, and without any more ceremony the two parted at the threshold.

This was the reception Mirā got at the hands of her husband’s people. It cut her to the quick. She was subsequently denied admittance into the Rānā’s Zenānā, and separate lodgings were allotted to that heathen girl whose touch was pollution. Her husband, the Rānee’s son, was forbidden

to visit her. She was treated like an outcaste in what was her own home.

This strange and inhuman conduct of her husband's people, however, could not damp her spirits. It did not matter to the innocent girl that she was deprived of the company of her earthly husband. She was wedded in spirit to the Lord Krishna in whom she had found all that her soul was hankering after. Her spirit found a haven of peace in her *Ranchhorjee*, the image of the god she worshipped from her babyhood. So, in the face of the taunts and jeers that were levelled against her, she continued to worship the idol of her heart. The outside world was like a blank that had lost all its charms for this young girl of sixteen.

IV

One fine moonlit night Rānā Kumbha was watching at the gate of Mirā's sleeping chamber. Unclean rumours had reached the ears of the new Rānā of Mewar, impeaching the fidelity of his Vaishnava wife. So, he was himself mounting guard at dead of night. Mirā was talking to somebody. It was joyous company. The shouts of her hilarity aroused the jealous suspicions of the Rānā, and, sword in hand, he

forced open the door and indignantly demanded of Mirā with whom she was making merry at that hour of the night. Kumbha found none in the room except his wife though he made a laborious search. Not a mouse stirred. To the jealous questions of the Rānā innocent Mirā replied that she was enjoying the company of her "bridegroom." Kumbha was in great wrath. "Who can be your bridegroom, faithless woman, but myself who brought you to Mewar?" "He is not my lord, O lord of Mewar, who has treated me thus cruelly. It is Krishna, the Holder of mountains, the Slayer of Kansa. I have found His love and with tears have I planted its seed in my heart and tended the seedling till it has grown into a spreading tree. I am now enjoying its cool shade. This body of flesh and blood is at the disposal of the King of Mewar, but my soul is held in 'fee simple' to Lord Shree Krishna, the King of kings. I am His servant for ever and a day."

The boldness and sincerity of her words struck deep into the mind of the Rānā. For a time he understood the folly of his ways and was persuaded to make a liberal grant for the maintenance of Mirā's establishment. The Rānā let her alone.

V

For some time it went well with Mirā. Absorbed in her worship she gave herself up entirely to her devotional exercises. But she did not shave her head; she did not wear the bark of trees, nor did she go through any religious austerities. On the other hand, a born princess and wife of a prince, she decorated herself richly as she would adorn the image she worshipped. Was this her renunciation? She was earthly: she liked the things of the earth. Mark the reply she made to the ladies of the royal harem who came one day to scoff. On being charged that her habits were inconsistent with the time-honoured Vaishnava practices she said, "If only baths would bring you any the nearer to God then certainly the shark and the crocodile have got their salvation; if a dietary of pure fruits and roots would make a saint of you, then monkeys and bats would swell the list of saints; if, again, a dish of herbage and water would give you beatitude, then the goats and deer of the forest have surely been blest. It is love, it is charity, it is the sincere outpouring of the faithful heart that can get you on the road to the Lord of your heart, no matter if you worship

him in rich and costly raiments or the rags of the mendicant."

The ladies who "came to scoff remained to pray."

But the jealous heart of the Rānā could not be purged clean of his suspicious thoughts.

VI

Mirā was singing her soul-enthraling hymns in her hall of worship. Her rich voice, melodious and rhythmic to a degree was wafted on the wings of the breeze to the feet of her Lord Shree Krishna. Her divine music enchanted the audience. After she had finished her prayers, a Vaishnavite mendicant came forward and offered a rich necklace of pearls as a present to the god. "Years ago I was a merchant of substance," said the devotee, "but I have renounced the world and its pleasures. What better use can I make of this garland than by offering it as a homage to the Lord?" The poor pilgrim was importunate and would not leave unless the desire of his heart was fulfilled. Mirā accepted the gift so humbly offered, threw the necklace round the head of Shree Krishna and dismissed the man. But poor Mirā did not know what trouble it would bring her in its train. The man was none other

than the great Moghul Emperor Akbar who was attracted by the fame of Mirā's music, and, disguised as a mendicant, made his pilgrimage to the shrine. Akbar, satisfied that Mirā was matchless as an artist, made the costly present in recognition of her merit. But Dame Rumour put a very different complexion on this simple incident. The story, exaggerated or underrated to suit the ends of designing men, reached the ears of Rānā Kumbha in a distorted form. He made up his mind to set evil tongues at rest by doing away with this constant source of irritation.



VII

It was a trying situation. Sore in heart and prejudiced in mind, the Rānā visited his innocent wife in her room for the second time. The scowl on his forehead indicated the coming storm. But Mirā did not lose her self-possession. She knew that the visit of the Rānā was ominous, but she did not shrink in his presence. She faced the situation heroically. What possible fears could divert her from the path she had chalked out for herself? What earthly injuries could make her turn back from the enjoyment

of heavenly bliss? To her, the earth was only a temporary abode, and the physical frame was nothing but a prison-cell for her soul that was eager to burst through its bars and fly to the Eternal Spirit. She was ready for the worst, if the worst would come. A terrible oath escaped the lips of the Rānā of Mewār. He demanded where Mirā had got that necklace from. "The Lord hath got it for Himself," was the fearless reply of Mirā. "He took a fancy for it and wears it round His neck." The Rānā lost his patience. Holding a cup of poison before his wife, he ordered her to drink it off. Like a meek and faithful Indian wife, with a face beaming with radiant joy that the time was near when her soul would fly to her Heavenly Lord, Mirā took the cup with unshaken hands. Offering it as a libation to Shree Krishna, she quaffed off the contents. It was the work of a moment to decide and to do. It was done,—but lo! the poison was even as nectar to Mirā Bāi. She assimilated the venom and did not die. Next day at Durbār time the baffled Rānā passed the doom of banishment on the witch that bore a charmed life. Mirā was turned out of doors. The gates of Mewār were shut against the lawfully wedded wife of Rānā Kumbha.

VIII

To holy Brindāban, where the Lord Krishna passed the early days of His incarnated existence, Mirā Bāi turned her weary footsteps now. A large following kept her company. Though abandoned by her husband, she yet commanded the veneration of a large section of the people of her own creed. Her religious discourses attracted many Vaishnava saints who were proud to cultivate her acquaintance. Passing a few years in this way at Brindāban, and visiting the sacred shrines where the Lord was pleased to reveal His youthful activities, this persecuted lady visited Dwārakā in Kāthiāwād, the scene of the later-day activities of Lord Krishna. There she founded and endowed a monastery wherein she enshrined her idol *Ranchhorjee*. Her followers flocked to the temple in large numbers from the remotest corners of Vaishnava India.

IX

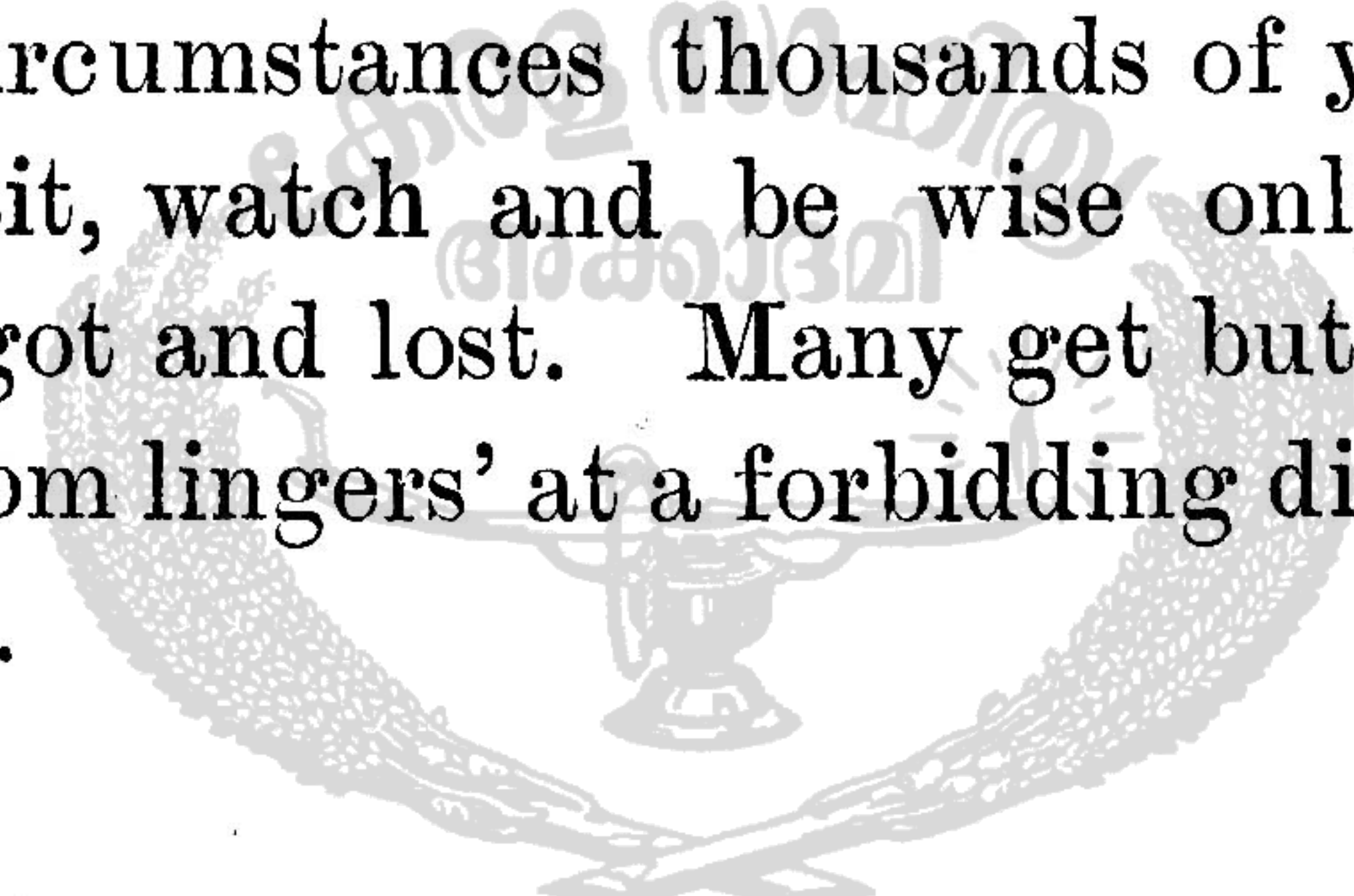
It is *Janmāshdami* in the month of Bhādra, the anniversary of the birth of the Lord. The newly founded temple of *Ranchhorjee* in Dwārakā to-day appears gay as on a festive occasion. Mirā in celebrating her worship at the temple has invited all her friends to partake of the blessings

of Krishna. People, attracted by the reports of Mirā's devotion, have come from distant parts of India to witness the celebration of the anniversary of the Lord at the sea-side monastery, and the hostess is looking to the comforts of all the pilgrims. Suddenly the men find a fine palanquin, carried on the shoulders of stalwart Rājput bearers, making for Mirā Bāi's temple. Richly caparisoned elephants, gaily decked horses and liveried footmen follow the conveyance at a respectful distance. Mewār banners are floating high above the procession. Rānā Kumbha is come to take back his queen. The Rānā has understood that Mirā is a chaste woman ; her fidelity, her sincerity cannot be questioned. Repenting of his past misdeeds the Rānā comes personally to take his wife back to the palace of Mewār. And Mirā ! She is ready to go. She looks as if in glad anticipation of this *Home-coming*. Richly attired in costly velvet and precious jewels, the beautiful Mirā takes the dust of her husband's feet and enters the temple of *Ranchhorjee* to have, as every body thinks, a last look at her idol. With her own hands she bars the door of the temple from inside. The Chief waits outside with his men ; but the slandered, abandoned and persecuted lady never comes out

again. The Rājputs force open the door, but Mirā is missing. The Lord Shree Krishna is smiling in the robes and jewels that decked the earthly tenement of the soul of this saintly lady. She has become *one* with the bridegroom of her choice.

X

Wait, Rānā Kumbha, for many a day to come, even as King Rām Chandra did under almost similar circumstances thousands of years before you. Wait, watch and be wise only to repent that you got and lost. Many get but few retain, and 'wisdom lingers' at a forbidding distance from the world.



KSHAMĀVATI.

(SACRIFICE).

I

Every Hindu, literate or illiterate, who claims any intimacy with the common usages prevailing in his country knows Khanā,* the lady astrologer of India. In the every day concerns of his

* For a part of the materials of this history of Khanā's life, I am indebted to an admirable book called "Varāhamihira" written by Pandit K. P. Vidyaratna and published by the Basumati Press, Calcutta. My thanks are also due to Sreeman Prafulla Kumar Ghosh of the Bogra Zilla School for an illuminating article on the subject published in the Rangpur Bikās, 1918. The current traditions regarding the life of Kshamāvati (Khanā in popular parlance) are worse than a myth. There is evidence to prove that she could never have set her foot on the soil of Ceylon, or graced the court of King Vikramāditya, Prince Arthur of Indian legendary lore. The supposition would be a monstrous anachronism. Yet the stuff circulated by a Bengali novelist of great repute has been gulped with great relish by an unthinking section of the reading public, and accepted as gospel-truth. Fiction has killed history, and the pity of it is that the story told in a very charming Bengali style has been allowed to find currency, and has yet remained unchallenged by any serious student of history. On this point the reader is referred to critics like Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Roy, Professor, Cuttack College ; Babu Dinesh Chandra Sen, Professor, Calcutta University ; and to the *Viswakosha*, the Encyclopedia of the Bengali language.

life the Hindu has occasions to allude to the sayings of Khanā times without number. A Hindu of the orthodox school whose mind still retains a lingering trace of old-world opinions must not set about a particular work, if any prophecy of Khanā condemns the wisdom of such a step. The simple-minded husbandman, be he a Hindu or a Mahomedan, is sure to wait for the propitious moment for sowing or harvesting : Khanā has laid it down. The Hindu woman will look for an omen revealed by Khanā before setting her hand to anything of domestic urgency. But to the educated Hindu Khanā is something more. He knows her better for her amazing self-sacrifice than for the numerous restrictions she has imposed on the freedom of his movements in everyday life.

II

In a charming little valley in modern Kāffiristān, walled by the Hindu-Kush on the west, and the mountains of Cāshmere on the east, there was a small village, Srinagar by name. About two hundred years ago, when Delhi was thrown into the vortex of a political revolution on the eve of the dissolution of the Moghul

Empire, the Cāshmere Brāhman Atanāchāryya was taking his observations with the *Ursa Major* and *Ursa Minor* in his ancestral seat at Srinagar. Free from the excitement of all revolutionary politics, free from the snare of court preferment and popular applause this learned Doctor of Astronomy was following his delightful pursuit in a rural retreat. Considerably advanced on the shady slope of fifty, the widower Atanāchāryya was somehow passing his time between watching a brilliant star in the midnight sky and gazing at another by his side on the earth—his pretty little daughter Kshamāvati, a jolly, bright child of six years or so.

III

The professor lost his wife when Kshamā was a suckling baby, and the difficult charge of bringing up the child naturally devolved on him. Father and mother in one, the solitary recluse did his work with a creditable zeal. He nursed, fed and clothed the baby with his own hands, and his neighbours did not know that the daughter of Atanāchāryya lacked the tender nursing of a delicate maternal hand. The child was the constant companion of her father in his rambles through his native woods and glades.

She would sit by his side when her father kept gazing at the midnight sky to solve an intricate astronomical situation. The childish curiosity of Kshamāvati very often prompted a series of random queries, and she would not give her father rest unless she could be satisfied. Thus was fostered in the child a thirst for knowledge which in later years made such a valuable contribution to Indian astronomic lore. Thus breathed Kshamāvati in the intellectual atmosphere of her father's study in a hillside Bactrian village, and her early associations fitted her eminently for the unique position she afterwards occupied in Hindu astronomy.

IV

Thus, when Kshamā was almost out of her cradle, she imbibed from her father an irrepressible zeal for mathematical studies. Her intelligent enquiries about the heavenly bodies did not escape the watchful eye of her father. He fed her growing curiosity and devoted all his spare half-hours to initiate her into the mysteries of the science of stars. Under his very careful and sympathetic guidance, Kshamāvati, by the time she was eleven, had a peep into the theories of Vāskarāchāryya and Varāha-

mihira, * famous scholars of ancient India. But her intense longing for a greater participation in the rich legacies left by the Indian astronomers of old raised a new difficulty. Srinagar and its seclusion could not afford an adequate field for the intellectual activities of this inquisitive girl. For days together Atanāchāryya tried to come to a solution, and the more did he think, the stronger did the desire grow in him to move to a more bracing atmosphere which could satisfy the intellectual cravings of Kshamāvati. Benares in those days was the most important centre of Hindu learning. Science and literature flourished there side by side. So, the astronomer of Srinagar shed many a parting tear before leaving his paternal seat for good, and came to settle in the famous city of Vārānasi (Benares).

V

Father and daughter passed some days in their new home in making acquaintances. Vārānasi could not present any new feature of

* Through a sad perversion of truth this name has been split up into Varāha and Mihira by the novelist already mentioned. Two separate individuals are conceived as father and son. But Varāhamihira is one name as Haricharan. In the famous Sanskrit verse about the Nine Jewels of King Vikramāditya, the compound Varāhamihira is in the *singular* number and not in the *dual*.

attraction to the old man who had seen much of the world, and had no other earthly concern save and except the education of his daughter, the only delight of his heart. But to Kshamā it was a period of excitement. She was in a whirlpool of novel sensations, one chasing the other in rapid succession in a kaleidoscopic show, as it were. Benares has ever been the magnificent dream-land of ancient Hindu civilisation, a favourite resort of the Goddess of Learning and her votaries. The ancient schools of Sanskrit learning, each under a Professor of recognised ability, the number of earnest students hailing from the remotest parts of India, the temples with their priests chanting the Vedic hymns at morning and evening worship,—in short, this University atmosphere of the city, most favourable to the growth of a *Brahmachārī's* mind captured the imagination of Kshamāvati and made an indelible impression on her mind. With a singleness of purpose she gave herself up to her favourite study, and made the most of the literary opportunities Vārānasi could afford. In a short time the fame of her father spread through the city, and before the year was fairly out, the Professor found himself surrounded by a number of inquisitive learners who flocked

to his house for instruction. Though not included in the old man's original programme, the school greatly advanced the object which brought him to Benares. Thrown into the company of learned scholars, Kshamā easily mastered the whole system of Indian astronomy, which so profoundly influenced her scholastic career in after years.

It must, however, be borne in mind that, with this extraordinary expansion of her intellect, Kshamā was rapidly growing into a beautiful maiden. The time was coming when, as a Hindu maiden, she was sure to be called away to a sphere of life more congenial to her age and sex.

VI

Of the numerous pupils that sat for instruction at the feet of the Achāryya in Benares there was a Brahmin youth, Mihira by name, hailing from a sea-side district of Bengal. He was born at Chandrapura,* a pretty little town skirted by a fringe of cocoa-nut palms and betel-nut trees, and surrounded by an old fashioned moat on all sides. Chandrapura was the seat

* Dewli, a small village near the Sub-Divisional town of Baraset in the 24-Parganahs still marks the site of ancient Chandrapura, where the name of Kshamāvati (Khanā) coupled with that of Mihira is still extant. The ruins of a Rājā's palace are still visible there, and old-folk gossip yet recalls with a glow of pride the deeds of Rājā Chandraketu who held his court there with all the pomp of a feudal chief of pre-British India.

of a feudal lord of Moghul India, who punctually paid his revenues into the royal treasury at the provincial capital, and was left in the unmolested enjoyment of his rights as an independent chief. The family of Mihira, holding service under Rājā Chandraketu and boasting of a matrimonial alliance with the Rāj, was of considerable influence in that part of Bengal. Mihira received the benefit of a culture becoming his high status in society. He studied Grammar, Rhetoric, Mathematics and Astronomy under the paternal supervision of the Rājā, but an intense longing to complete his education summoned him away from his ancestral home, and this is how we find him among the students of Atanāchāryya in Benares.

VII

A very clever pupil of his preceptor, Mihira had his place secure in a warm corner of the old man's heart. He became the fellow-student of Kshamāvati with whom he discussed the puzzles of their study, and the conclusions they arrived at were tested by the Professor, and commended highly for their accuracy. Kshamāvati kept pace with her friend in all his intellectual pursuits. Now and then she would set her

father wondering by clearing up intricacies that would bewilder the whole school,—Mihira included. Over and above, Kshamā evinced a keen interest in Astrology, a branch of learning which, owing to its mysterious nature baffled many an ardent spirit. Kshamā taught its mysteries to Mihira, but the seed did not take kindly to the soil, and Mihira dropped the programme by mutual agreement.

While things were thus progressing the invisible Fates were trying to bind them together in a stronger bond than mere school friendship. Constant association and similarity of age, station and occupation promoted the growth of a very tender feeling between the two. No wonder, therefore, that these youthful hearts were drawn to each other by a stronger and closer tie than mere companionship. The father shrewdly guessed at the feelings of both, but unless he could satisfy himself that Mihira was a desirable party, he could not look upon the prospect with an eye of approval. At this juncture an incident occurred which set all his doubts at rest.

VIII

Rājā Chandraketu was on his way to a pilgrimage to Benares. In these days of safe

and cheap travelling in British India our readers can possibly have no idea of the trouble a journey meant here two centuries ago. Travelling was so very costly and unsafe that it was reckoned a remarkable achievement if the pilgrim could ever come back to his family : the adventures of Stanley and Livingstone were nothing to the feat of the Bengali in making the distance between Dacca and Murshidabad, in and out. But to a Rājā the case, of course, was somewhat different. Thus, the lord of Chandrapura and his entourage found themselves, without any great ado, seated comfortably in half-a-dozen country boats on the breast of the Ganges, decidedly the most convenient conveyance in pre-British India. The Rājā must have thanked his stars that, like ordinary folk, he had not to dispose of his property by a will before leaving Chandrapura.

Amidst the good wishes of the Rājā's people, the small flotilla sailed up the Ganges majestically, vying with the proverbial slowness of the snail and the tortoise. By short stages it left behind a town here and a village there on either bank of the river. The distant hamlet reposing in the midst of bamboo clumps and tamarind groves, the shy village maiden with

an earthen pitcher balanced on her head, the light-hearted peasant-boy singing and binding his sheaves in the yellow fields yonder, the supple cow-boy running after his drove of cattle or twisting the tail of a truant that had happened to stray into a neighbouring hay-store,—all these old familiar scenes seemed to revive the interest of the party in rural life and its homely joys. After an otherwise uneventful career of a month or so the boats sighted the domes of Benares, and it must have been a very agreeable sigh of relief that the Rājā breathed when his journey came to a close.

IX

On landing, this Bengali nobleman found himself besieged by a troop of hungry priests and professional guides who offered, for a fee, to take all possible care, temporal and spiritual, of the Rājā's concerns. But the first care of the Rājā was to trace the whereabouts of his adopted son Mihira. As soon as the guides heard of the Bengali student, they took the Rājā's men to the various Sanskrit *Chatuspāthis*, and the fame of Atanāchāryya naturally drew them thither and led to the discovery of Mihira. What an agreeable surprise to the young

man ! He made all possible haste to meet his benefactor.

Mihira was now grown to man's stature. His robust physique, his stately bearing, and the stamp of culture on his noble countenance created a very favourable impression on the Rājā's mind. He was glad that the time of Mihira was so usefully spent in the acquisition of the ancient astronomic lore of India. Chandraketu seized on the very happy idea of removing a long-felt want of sea-side Bengal by making him come back home to grace his court with his scholarship. So, he lost no time in making the proposal and gave Mihira a week's time to consider.

X

It was really a trying time for Mihira. The situation offered opened for him his way to worldly fame : moreover, it was among his own kith and kin that he was going back. But he remembered Kshamāvati. He had learnt to take a very delicate interest in his agreeable companion. How could he leave her who was the spring of his actions ? Separation now might mean separation for ever. He would take her with him, if possible. He hit upon a very clever plan.

He appeared before Chandraketu on the appointed day and talked the matter over.

“I thank you,” said Mihira, “I thank you most heartily, Sir, for the very welcome proposal, and your word is my law. But I am afraid I am too insignificant for the great honour you have reserved for me. I am yet a student, and until such time I can worthily fill the chair of Astronomy in your Court it had better go to a Professor of ripe experience and admitted scholarship. There is no dearth of erudition in Benares.”

“Quite true,” said the Rājā, “but I do not know of any one in this famous University, who would willingly change it for a dark corner in an out-of-the-way locality.”

“My mind,” replied Mihira, “naturally turns to my own preceptor who is at this moment the wonder of the city. In Astronomy he does not yield the palm to a rival.”

“The greater reason,” objected Chandraketu, “why he can never agree to leave Benares.”

“To explain matters more clearly,” replied Mihira, and his eyes sparkled with the fire of an eloquent advocacy, “I must say that my preceptor is almost a new arrival in the city, and has not formed any permanent ties. Not being

saddled with a family, his only concern is to find a safe home for his only child, a daughter whom he has been giving the education the sharpest scholar in the country would envy. Where can such a home be found, if it be not in the gift of Rājā Chandraketu, the well-known patron of learning in Bengal ?”

These words of Mihira set the Rājā thinking. Did he shrewdly guess the meaning of the last speech of his adopted son ? Mihira was dismissed with instructions to arrange an interview with the famous Astronomer of Benares.

XI

Remote from the din and bustle of the world's business, the heat and dust of the crowd, far away from the “ignoble strife” of clashing interests stood the modest academy in which Atanāchāryya taught his admiring school. The cottage commanded the view of the broad expanse of Gangā's waters, and was just rimmed by an arcade of shady trees, past which sighed the gentle breeze to relax the strain on the intellect of the teacher and his pupils. Altogether, this charming little place had about it an air of sanctity, good-will and peace.

One morning, the old Professor, seated on a raised platform round the foot of a leafy tree, was listening intently to his daughter's exposition of a newly formulated theory about the partial eclipse of the moon when Mihira came in and announced a visitor. Rājā Chandraketu, for it was none other than that august personage, was received by Atanāchāryya with a befitting dignity. The exchange of civilities over, the Rājā explained how his beloved ward happened to be in Benares, and how the fame of the Professor had attracted Chandraketu to that temple of learning and occasioned the interview.

“And because Benares has reaped the fruit of your erudition for a sufficiently long time, is it not just and fair that distant Bengal should now come in for her share of the glory of receiving a scholar of your attainments?”

With this the Rājā unfolded the plan he had in his mind, discussed between themselves every phase of the question, and in the end, gained his point.

“As you promise, O kind-hearted Rājā,” concluded the Pandit, “a safe asylum for my daughter who is more to me than even the starry firmament above, I welcome your proposal and agree to make Bengal the land of my adoption.”

For once young Mihira had read the human heart aright.

XII

Years have passed since Atanāchāryya left Benares and came to settle in Bengal. All these years have been an uninterrupted round of happiness for Kshamāvati. Steadily did she rise in the estimation of the Rājā who found in her ample evidence of a very high order of learning,—mastery in the intricacies of Astronomy and the puzzles of Astrology hitherto unknown in Bengal. Chandraketu heaped favours on her father, and gave her a home and a husband; and Mihira, too, in getting her as his wife, had the fondest hopes of his heart realized. Kshamāvati was now a Bengali woman ministering to the comforts of her father and her husband's people. Though a woman of a distant land she was in womanly virtues no way inferior to her Bengali sisters. Bred in science and ripe in scholarship, she was yet a dutiful wife and an ideal woman. Though most of her time was taken up in satisfying inquisitive learners and solving the hardest riddles of Astrology proposed by the Court, yet at home she was the delight of her old father and the best beloved of

her husband. She cooked and served, and was "a ministering angel" in hours of need. Great as a scholar, she was still greater as an Indian *woman* whom entire self-abnegation has rendered conspicuous in the eyes of the world.

XIII

Kshamāvati was at the height of human happiness. Delusion! We imagine ourselves at the height when there is really one step between ourselves and the yawning abyss. The Fates work beyond the gaze of man. They worked silently to give a very tragic end to Kshamā's life. At Chandrapura her life was a chapter of success. Each day added a fresh page to the solution of a hitherto unsolved problem of the science. Each day brought a fresh discovery in the domain of Astrology. Her predictions and their fulfilment were looked upon with a vague sense of awe by the people far and near, by the literate and the illiterate alike. Every new triumph of truth, every laurel added to her crown of glory helped to endear her to the Rājā, but removed her one step farther from the sympathy of the old school of Pandits that fattened at the Rājā's Court. The palmy days of the Pandits were gone. Their

influence at Court was sadly at a discount. The fame of Kshamāvati eclipsed that of all, and there was no man in the length and breadth of the country, who could even make the pretence of an approach to the scholarship of this lady from a foreign land. But this was too much for jealousy to bear. Intrigue was already rearing its head. The old Professor was dead, and Mihira could not cope single-handed with the rising tide of popular feeling against his wife.

XIV

A terrible earthquake shook the plains of Bengal in the winter of 1742. The general damage was serious, but the area bordering on the Bay of Bengal suffered most. It caused a wail of distress among the tenants of Chandra-pura, and the number of homeless families swelled from day to day. The pitiable sight moved the Rājā who hastened to request his Pandits to intercede for divine protection. Those "lords spiritual" of the Rāj suggested the holding of a great sacrifice in the palace grounds with a view to propitiate the Earth Goddess, so that no more earthquakes could visit the land. As a Bengali Brahmin of the orthodox type, Mihira could not help signing the requisition of

the Pandits on the old Rājā, advising an expenditure of a good round sum in the propitiatory rites.

XV

To Kshamāvati the requisition came as a surprise when Rājā Chandraketu communicated to her the decision of the Pandits. She was pained to find the name of her husband associated with such a hoax. She protested that the goddess in question had nothing to do with an earthquake, which she explained as a simple phenomenon of Nature beyond the control of religious offerings and propitiatory rites. She explained the matter rationally before the whole Court and challenged the synod of priests to disprove her exposition.

But the attitude of Kshamāvati only evoked a storm of indignant protest from the priests. Versed in the mysteries of an occult lore, these hoary sages "though vanquished would argue still". They made angry speeches in the hall and set up a violent agitation against the up-country wench, whose heterodox views and juggleries and witchcraft were bringing devastation on a smiling land. They dragged her name in the mire, and various scandals were manufac-

tured and circulated by some unprincipled men in their pay. They breathed forth venom into the ears of Mihira against his wife, vented their pent-up spleen against the innocent lady in a furious anathema and passed on her the doom of banishment from the land.

XVI

We are now approaching the final act in the great tragedy of Kshamā's life. We find her here the great woman who lives to us in death. Truth is indeed stranger than Fiction, and where else will you find such an example, if not in India, where the woman has held her life as less than nothing, if she could by its sacrifice render others happy? From pre-historic times the story has been repeated over and over again on the plains of the Ganges and the Indus that the mother lives for her child, the wife for her husband, the woman for the man. The Indian woman knows of no separate existence. Indian womanhood is rich in this tradition of selflessness, and the Indian heart is proud of it.

To resume our story. The mandate of the synod has been duly communicated to Kshamā-vati by her husband. She sees through the plot, but bows to the decree of fate. She does

not care for her own happiness, but feels most for her innocent husband who has been made a victim to the tyranny of priestcraft. She resolves to do her part. To extricate her husband from this difficult position she will play the selfless woman.

XVII

Early next morning, Mihira is offering his prayers in the temple of the tutelary goddess of his family. He is absorbed in his meditations. With eyes closed and palms joined he sits before the goddess, as if praying to her for a way out of this ordeal. He sits motionless like a statue before a statue. His fervent prayers over, he opens his eyes slowly, and finds before him the head of his beloved wife sundered from the lifeless body, rolling in a pool of blood,—a voluntary offering to the goddess. Kshamā has noiselessly crept into the room, unnoticed by her husband. Snatching the sword from the hand of the goddess she has severed her own head and made a present of it to him whom she loves best. “I am going, husband, but I die with the satisfaction that I have saved your country from humiliation and your family from ignominy. You are great, and I am small.”

Kshamāvati is dead, but she lives in every Indian heart. She made a sacrifice.

AHALYĀ BĀI.

(THE IDEAL QUEEN).

I

The pilgrim to the sacred shrine at Gaya offers his worship, first of all, to the great god Vishnu of the Hindu pantheon. But he makes it a point to render his homage to the marble statue of a noble-hearted Marhatta lady who spent a part of her royal treasure in erecting the holy Vishnupada nearly two centuries ago. Indeed Ahalyā Bāi is one of those ideal Hindu women whose piety has rendered them famous in history. Between the Himalayas on the north, and Cape Comorin to the south, between the Bay of Bengal to the east and the Arabian Sea to the west, there is not a single Hindu household but cherishes the memory of this Marhatta lady for some act of charity or other : in fact, so abiding is the influence of Ahalyā's benefactions on Hindu India that the oriental imagination has

ranked her with her namesake the lady saint, one of the five great characters* of Hindu Mythology, of whom every pious Hindu asks a blessing in the morning before beginning the day's work. The life of Ahalyā abundantly proves that at least some aspects of the mythical lore of pre-historic India have been realized in modern history.

II

At Pathardih, a small Marhatta military station in the district of Ahmednagar (Malwa), lived a gentleman farmer named Anand Rāo Scinde, distantly connected with the family of the well-known Scindia Chief of the Marhatta Confederacy. Anand Rāo Scinde was a pious and inoffensive man, rather inclined to be useful to his fellowmen, and had an equally gentle wife to help him in his journey through life. There was nothing to strike a note of discord in the sweet tenor of their lives except one that made the couple unhappy at times,—and that was the want of a pretty sweet smile from a baby's lips to cheer their cottage home. The farmer and his wife waited for many a long year and spent their little all in numerous propitiatory

* Ahalyā, Draupadi, Kunti, Tārā and Mandodari.

rites. But the desired blessing was withheld, and the couple felt miserable in their loneliness ; when, tradition says, the goddess Bhagavati, pleased beyond measure at their pious devotion, appeared to Anand Rāo in a dream, and told him that she herself would shortly come down to call him her father*. The revelation might, or might not be a dreamer's hallucination ; but this is history, pure and unalloyed, that in 1735, when the couple were far advanced in years, a daughter was born to them to solace the days of their life that remained. They took the gift with grateful hearts and called the baby Ahalyā.

III

The girl could not boast of any prepossessing looks ; on the other hand, her features were homely, her complexion was of a dark olive,† and her education of the most rudimentary type. Yet she was affectionate, gentle and good. The lessons of charity and devotion she gathered from the everyday life of her parents laid in her tender heart the foundations of her future benefactions to the various religious and charitable endowments of the country. When the girl was nine

* Recorded by Mr. J. N. Basu in his authentic biography of Ahalyā Bāi in Bengali.

† Sir John Malcolm—Central India—Vol. I. p. 192.

years old and her parents were on the look-out for a suitable match for their daughter, the famous Marhatta Chief, Malhār Rāo Holkar happened to halt with his regiment for a day's rest at the military barracks at Pathardih. The girl Ahalyā, led by childish curiosity, went to have a look at the fine Marhatta troopers from Indore, and fell in the way of the great Chief himself. He caught up the brave little creature in his arms, hugged and caressed her with a father's pride, and was so very impressed with the frankness of her speech and suavity of her manners, the irresistible charms of simplicity and tenderness marking her countenance, that he made enquiries about the girl and came to know from the village schoolmaster that the object of his attentions could claim her relationship with one of the highest families in the Marhatta land. This was precisely what he wanted, for he had set his heart upon making the girl his daughter-in-law, the wife of his only son, Kundee Rāo, heir to the *guddee* of Indore. The impossible came to pass, and the pious farmer couple, taking it for a god-send, welcomed the proposal with gratified hearts. The marriage was celebrated (1744), and Anand Rāo and his pious wife returned thanks to the

Almighty for the realization of what seemed to be beyond their wildest dream. Verily, the ways of Providence are inscrutable.

IV

In her new home Ahalyā made the best wife and the most obliging daughter-in-law. The Holkar Chief was rather short-tempered, and everybody around was afraid of his occasional outbursts. The private life of Malhār Rāo teemed with stories of blazing indiscretion and wanton folly. There was none in the royal household who could put an effective check upon his reckless doings. But Ahalyā tamed his fiery spirit, and curbed the unrestrained follies which, but for her timely intervention, might have led to most unpleasant consequences. It was only Ahalyā who managed to be in the good books of the haughty Chief.

Ahalyā cheerfully took part in the domestic work of the household, though there could possibly be no want of servants and menials. She regulated her life strictly according to the standard of a woman from the ordinary ranks of society, and was never proud of the vast wealth she became mistress of. She did not indulge in

luxury of any kind, and though her marriage raised her to the rank of a mighty princess they could not know from the affability of her manners, from her simplicity and humility, that Ahalyā was affected in the least by her elevation.

Unfortunately she was not destined to enjoy for long the blessings of her married life, for, in 1753, when she was barely out of her teens, Kundee Rāo was killed at the siege of Kumbhere, half-way between Deig and Bhartpur. The news of the premature end of his only son gave a great shock to the old Chief; it was certainly a greater shock to the young widow who thought of immolating herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased lord. But the old man would not let her go. He tried hard to dissuade her from her resolve, and when reasoning failed he wept like a child at the prospect of losing both son and daughter at the same time. The wailings of the hero of a hundred fights moved the naturally tender heart of Ahalyā who agreed to live, if only to console her father-in-law in his great bereavement. So she lived on, and it must be said that the decision was lucky for the people among whom she moved, and the country in which she lived.

V

Ahalyā was now initiated into the mysteries of government. She was a great help to the old Holkar who was so very confident of her abilities, that he entrusted, in a way, the management of the vast territories to his daughter-in-law. Ahalyā justified his expectations ; for when Malhār Rāo went to fight the Durani Chief on the memorable field of Panipat in 1761, he formally installed Ahalyā Bāi as Vicerene to the exclusion of the Chief Minister, Gangādhār Jasant. And the story is current that when Malhār Rāo returned home after Panipat had been lost by the Marhattas, he found the Holkar territories in a more flourishing condition than he could possibly have expected from his own administration.

Malhār Rāo Holkar died in 1769 at the age of sevent-six*, and the reigning Peshwā immediately sent a robe of honour to Malle Rāo, son of Ahalyā Bāi, recognising him thereby as the lawful successor to the rank, power and territories of his late grandfather. This dissipated young man had probably a tinge of insanity in him. That he was cruel, vicious and capricious

* Sir John Malcolm—Family of Holkar—P. 155.

was abundantly clear from the acts of recklessness he committed during his short reign. He flouted his mother's advice at every step, insulted the elders of the kingdom simply to make his authority felt, and oppressed the *raiyats* in various ingenious ways. The young chieftain was mad and perfidious, no less whimsical than the notorious Junā Khān who caused the ruin of a great empire. In the reckless folly of youth and power Malle Rāo out-heroded Herod himself. He was so much dreaded by the people, and so much hated by his own relations that his premature death after less than a year's mad career was hailed as a relief by all classes of his people. The pious mother lamented her hard fate in being cursed with this perfect brute of a son ; and, to quote a famous authority,* when Malle Rāo died, Ahalyā Bāi was led by horror at his cruel acts of insanity "to look upon his death as a fortunate event for him, herself and the country."

VI

It now devolved upon Ahalyā Bāi to assume the reins of government. She knew that with

*Sir John Malcolm—Memoir of Central India, vol. I. P. 158.

the death of her son there was no male heir to succeed to the vast Holkar estates. She was convinced at the same time that the beautiful edifice raised by her late father-in-law should not be allowed to crumble. She was perfectly sure that her principal supporters and the Marhatta military chiefs would remain staunch to her cause. So, in the interests of the family she represented, in the interests of the thousands committed to her charge, she must not mind her age and sex, but do her duty as the protectress of her people. Therefore she herself chose to sit at the helm of affairs. The young Peshwā Madhu Rāo recognised that her right to administer the affairs of her late father-in-law's estates was beyond question. But the wicked Rāghobā Dādā, uncle and adviser-in-chief to the Peshwā, led by interested motives, withheld sanction, and even led an expedition against the lady to compel her to abdicate in favour of an adopted son of his nomination. But this she would not do : and every reader of Marhatta history knows how the helpless widow of Kundee Rāo rose to her task and expelled the projected invasion of Rāghobā Dādā, which no canons of equity dictated, no motives of expediency supported, and no sane counsel ever sanctioned.

Free from the fear of an enemy inroad and recognised by the head of the Marhatta confederacy as the rightful administratrix of Malhār Rāo's estates, Ahalyā Bāi now devoted all her time and energy to the uplifting of her people. How far and how well she succeeded in her task is a matter of history. Her thirty years' reign formed the proudest epoch in the history of the native administration of Indore. It is not intended in these few pages to review her wise statesmanship at any length. That will make a volume too big for a snapshot like this. Let the story be told by that renowned historian* who was placed by the Governor-General in 1818 in the military and political charge of Central India. According to his estimate, Ahalyā Bāi "exhibited in the person of a female that combined talent, virtue and energy which made her, while she lived, a blessing to the country over which she ruled, and has associated her memory with every plan of improvement and just government in the province of Mālwa".

VII

The name of Ahalyā Bāi is held in the deep-

* Sir John Malcolm,—*"Memoir of Central India"*, Vol. I. P. 160.

est veneration through the length and breadth of Hindu India, not so much for her tactful statesmanship, as for her piety and munificence, and for her uniformly considerate treatment of her subjects. The mistress of untold treasures, she lived the life of an austere recluse, having no hankering after fame, authority and enjoyment. She was so proof against the charms of wealth that when she came into the possession of the fabulous riches of Malhār Rāo Holkar, she consecrated the hoarded gold to objects of charity by sprinkling a solution of holy water and *Toolasi* leaves (basil), after due ceremony, over what she might easily have squandered away in luxury.* She regarded herself as a trustee of the estate, and for thirty years she administered the sacred trust as faithfully as the Good Nasiruddin did in Pathan India, centuries before her.

It must, however, be said to the credit of the lady that though she had the tender heart of a woman, she was free from its weaknesses. She proved her mettle when she matched her strength against the numerous hordes of Rāghobā Dādā. She got the situation completely under her

* Malcolm's 'Memoir'—Vol. I. P. 186.

control when she had to deal with the intriguing old Dewan Gangādhār Jaswant. She congratulated her people when she heard the news of the untimely death of her profligate son, Malle Rāo, whose life she considered an unmitigated evil for Mālwa. She *governed* when she was called upon to govern; yet she did not like to exercise her royal authority a moment more than necessary. Her enemies attempted to wrest from her the authority she lawfully inherited from the founder of the House of Holkar. She put in all her strength to defend it; and, as soon as she vindicated her right in spite of enemy machinations, her aversion to power came back, and she transferred at once the power she enjoyed to Tukājēe Rāo whom she nominated as the future head of the Holkar family.

VIII

Numerous are the instances* of this lady's maternal regard for her subjects, only a few of which are related here. Once a rich merchant of Indore, Devi Chānd by name, died leaving no heir but a king's fortune behind. According to the common practice prevailing in the native

* Most of these are recorded in greater details by Malcolm.

governments of those days, Tukājee Holkar claimed a large share of the wealth for the State. The wife of the dead banker implored redress of Ahalyā Bāi. She gave a patient hearing to her case, and recognising the helpless widow as the sole mistress of the property left by her husband, dismissed her with a rich dress as a mark of her royal condescension. Tookāji understood the hint, and readily complied with her orders "not to molest the city with unjust exactions."

Ahalyā rejoiced when she found her subjects rise to prosperity. Diligent industry in a *raiyat* was a sure passport to her protection and patronage. A rich banker, named Subha Kshuna Das, died at Seronji without any heir. When the widow desired to adopt a son, the manager of Ahalyā Bāi refused to allow the adoption unless a fine of three *lacs* of rupees was paid down. The widow hastened to unfold her tale of distress to the protectress of her people. Ahalyā heard the story, and removing the manager at once from his place confirmed the adoption. She then took the adopted child in her arms, bestowed caresses and rich presents upon him, and sent him back with assurances of her good will and protection.

A notable instance of her unselfishness has

yet to be mentioned. Two brothers, Tuppee and Bārānashi, rich bankers of Kergong, died without heirs, leaving to their widows a large estate of accumulated wealth. The women offered to make over the treasure to the Government ; but Ahalyā declined the offer, and at her advice the whole money was spent by the widows in works of public utility.

How considerate she was in her demands from her people may be gathered from her instructions to a certain revenue officer, Kunder Rāo, who was a bit overzealous in collecting the revenues of the State. When reports reached her ears that the poor cultivators did not like the rather oppressive methods pursued by the collector, Ahalyā herself wrote to her officer in the following terms, "Remember, my dear Sir, you will have given me greater satisfaction in the discharge of your duty by making my people contented than by being overstrict in your methods of collection."

For a Sovereign there can be no surer way than this to the peoples' heart. This course was invariably pursued by the lady for thirty long years ; and lasting memorials of this kind to her goodness and justice abound in the pages of Marhatta history. It is no wonder, therefore,

that her name is not only revered but adored in this country, where justice tempered with a grain of kindness appeals so forcibly to the popular mind.

IX

A spirit of charity no less than a sense of justice and toleration marked the entire course of her life, and in works of public utility Ahalyā Bāi stands unrivalled. The road leading to the fort of Janru over the Vindhya Ranges where the mountain is steep and inaccessible is an admirable construction costing her great labour and much money.

A European traveller * visiting Kedārnāth among the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas found, in 1818, a rest house for weary pilgrims built at the expense of Ahalyā Bāi. Go to holy Jagannāth in the East or to sacred Dwārāvati at the western extremity of India, visit Rāmeswaram near Adam's Bridge in the south, you will find holy temples built or religious establishments endowed at the expense of Ahalyā Bāi. The Vishnupada shrine at Gaya, the Visveswar temple and the Ahalyā Ghāt (a flight of stone steps)

* Captain T. D. Steuart, a political assistant to Sir John Malcolm.

leading to the river Ganges in Benares cost her a good round sum that could only be spent by the pious lady of Indore. All these and many more pious gifts, too numerous to be exhaustive in a notice like this, proceeded, one might say, from a purely religious motive—a purely sectarian charity, to say the least of it.

It may be said in reply that even her so-called sectarian charity was based on utilitarian grounds. She propitiated the gods of her religion to promote the welfare of her country. But over and above these religious benefactions a large number of charities stand to Ahalyā's credit, that you may call benevolent. She fed the poor every day : even the lowest classes were not forgotten. Her servants supplied thirsty travellers in the summer with cooling drinks on roads for miles around ; in the winter the poor got warm clothing for protection against the cold. Her sympathy was so universal that like the great Buddhist Emperor of Ancient India she thought compassionately of the beasts of the meadow, of the birds of the mid-air, and of the fish of the river. Was this foolish waste of wise humanity in the land, where to give doles to paupers has never been penalised on the statute-book of the country ?

X

Such was the public life of this great Marhatta woman who could spend so much in deeds of charity because she had to waste so little on a standing army. In those days of the dismemberment of a mighty empire, when smaller kingdoms were struggling hard for existence or supremacy, when kings were flying at one another's throat to kill or be killed, the widowed queen of Kundee Rāo reduced her army to a ludicrously small bodyguard of honour. Yet there was profound peace in her territories ; her subjects were happy and her name was blest. In speaking of her political relations with the contemporary Indian princes, Sir John Malcolm quotes the precise words * of a principal Brahmin officer of Ahalyā Bāi in reply to an observation of the Political Agent : "Among the princes of her own nation it would have been looked upon as sacrilege to have become her enemy, or indeed, not to have defended her against any hostile attempt. She was considered by all in the same light. The Nizām of the Deccan and Tippoo Sultan granted her the same respect as the Peshwā : and Mahomedans joined

* Family of Holkar, P. 189.

with Hindus in prayers for her long life and prosperity." It should be noted that when Ahalyā ruled, considerations of honour and chivalry did not count for much with the Knights-militant of the Mogul Dissolution.

XI

A peep into the daily occupations of this woman will immensely interest the curious student: at least the temptation to make a short allusion thereto is too strong to be resisted. Bara-mul Dādā who happened to be in constant attendance upon Ahalyā Bāi as being "an adopted domestic" in the royal household, has given a detailed picture of the daily life of his royal mistress; and we acknowledge our indebtedness to Sir John Malcolm for drawing again upon his inestimable wealth of information.* We learn from it that Ahalyā Bāi was a very early riser. When the world was yet asleep, she would leave her bed to hold communion with her Maker, to ask pardon for her lapses in all humility and to gain strength for the coming day's work from prayer and meditation. She then gave her daily doles to the poor and fed the hungry with her own

* Memoir of Central India—Vol. I. P. 178.

hands. Next she broke her fast upon a simple meal of herbs and fruits, totally abstaining from animal food of any kind, though not required to do so by the rules of her own caste. Prayers again followed by a short repose found her ready for the Durbar by two o'clock. Patient, just and accessible, she heard every cause in person, for she had done away with the *Purdah*. Durbar continued for at least four hours every day. At six she retired to her religious exercises, and a very frugal repast followed. Business was resumed when she issued urgent instructions to her ministers till late in the evening. The routine never changed except when she observed her religious fasts. She came to work for her people, and history bears ample testimony how far she succeeded in her self-imposed task.

XII

A brief estimate of her character will bring this short sketch to a close. Though misfortune dogged her steps, Ahalyā Bāi ever retained the geniality of her temper. Anger she knew not; indignation darkened her brow at times when she had to punish evildoers. Flattery made

little impression upon her mind ; * and temptations fought shy of her exemplary character. She had a cultivated mind and cultured tastes, an everlasting fund of maternal solicitude for her people and a deep sense of duty, piety and equity. She was more loved than dreaded for the moderation with which she wielded her authority ; for she “deemed herself answerable to God for every exercise of power.” She thought thrice before she resorted to measures of extreme severity. “Let us mortals”, she used to say, “beware how we destroy the works of the Almighty.”

We wind up this holy theme with the most reliable testimony to her greatness from authentic history. It is a European gentleman that speaks—a military dictator of an alien race, not certainly in love with the methods of native administration or the prejudices of our country. “The facts that have been stated of Ahalyā Bāi rest on grounds that admit of no scepticism. It is, however, an extraordinary picture ;—a female without vanity, a bigot without intolerance ; a mind imbued with the deepest superstition, yet

* An anecdote runs that a Brahmin wrote a complimentary volume in her praise. She heard it read, and then caused it to be thrown into the Narmadā. She was a weak and sinful woman, she said, and did not deserve to be so flattered. This was all the recognition she vouchsafed upon the author for his pains.

receiving no impressions except what promoted the happiness of those under its influence ; a being exercising.....despotic power, not merely with sincere humility, but under the sincerest moral restraint that a strict conscience could impose on human action ; and all this combined with the greatest indulgence for the weakness and faults of others. Such, at least, is the account which the natives of Mālwa give of Ahalyā Bāi : with them her name is sainted, and she is styled an Avatār, or Incarnation of the Divinity. In the most sober view that can be taken of her character, she certainly appears, within her limited sphere, to have been one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed ; and she affords a striking example of the practical benefit a mind may receive from performing her worldly duties under a deep sense of responsibility to its Creator.”

Sir John Malcolm is not certainly indulging in hyperbole which finds so much favour with the Oriental imagination.

V

THE CYCLE OF TRANSITION.



DEVI SĀRADĀ SUNDARI.

(SAINTLINESS).

“ Verily, I tell you, mother, a day will come when the world will dance a rapturous dance over your bowels and intestines—for a son like this (pointing to the great Keshab Chandra) has come to the world through your womb.”

The Great Paramahansa Rāmkrishna.*

I

They founded new empires on the ruins of old kingdoms, carrying everything before their conquering swords, inflicting misery and devastation upon the world they inhabited. The world called them great heroes, and the nations interested themselves greatly about their genealogies. So, the world has applauded the motley group from different nationalities, from the famous Macedonian to the Imperial Corsican, and has paused to ask who their mothers could be. But

* *Vide* Autobiography of Devi Sāradā Sundari, P. 97.

the world has never cared much to know of the genealogies of a different set of heroes who established the sovereign sway of Truth and Righteousness over the mind of a nation by removing the miseries of suffering humanity. It has never cared to know much of the mothers of Sankara, Buddha, Chaitanya, Rāmkrishna, Keshab Chandra or Vivekānanda, whose conquests were admittedly superior to those of Cæsar, Cromwell or Napoleon,—nay, of all of them put together. Yet, the fact is undisputed that the saintly ladies whom those great souls chose to call their mothers were an unfailing source of inspiration to their religious life, to a portion at least, if not the whole, of the spiritual triumph they achieved here and hereafter.

We are concerned here about the mother of the great Keshab Chandra Sen. About thirty years ago the Rev. P. C. Mazumdār of American fame wrote in the *Christian Register* about this saintly lady, “when Keshab finds the recognition of his greatness by a grateful posterity the claims and virtues of his good, noble-hearted mother will not go unrecognised.” Keshab Chandra’s place in the hearts of his countrymen is now assured ; it is time that we knew something of his mother. Devi Sārādā Sundari whose long life of

love and service, of piety, self-forgetfulness and uncomplaining toil has extorted the admiration of that great Christian Missionary, the Rev. J. T. Sunderland, M. A., of distant America.* Devi Sāradā Sundari brought together round her all the divergent elements which gathered round her illustrious son to constitute his great Church not confined to any locality but extending over many parts of India and Europe. From the Indian Paramahansa and the European Max Müller to the common clerk at the desk and the merchant at the counter, all who felt honoured by the friendship of Keshab looked upon her with all the feeling of filial reverence, and felt blessed by the benediction of her motherly heart. It flowed out to all and delighted in treating them to meals cooked by herself. Not to speak of the members of the Indian Theistic Church only, not to speak of the Hindus among whom she was born, not to speak of the Christians of distant lands,—such a great soul as the mother of Keshab Chandra deserves the homage of all classes of people, irrespective of colour, creed or denomination.

* "Some thoughts concerning Keshab Chandra Sen"—Modern Review, June 1913, p. 118.

II

Devi Sārādā Sundari whose revered name stands at the head of the present sketch was born in 1819 at her maternal uncle's place at Tribeni in the district of Hugli. Her father, the late Gourhari Das of Garifa, was a Vaidya by caste and a physician by profession. Sārādā Sundari was one of a family of four sisters and one brother, and was brought up by her father whose piety was the talk of the village. Education in the ordinary application of the word she had none, though she could read a letter and write a line or two. But she could recite texts from the Hindu Scriptures, and was versed in the mythical lore of her country. Thus she grew up in her maidenhood, trained in the seclusion of a Hindu home, without, in short, any opportunity of making her mark on society. Yet, she had to be married, and Babu Gourhari was greatly relieved when his wealthy co-villager, Dewan Rāmkaṃal Sen of the Bank of Bengal, accepted her as the prospective bride of his son Peary Mohan. Sārādā Sundari was then nine years old.

At ten she came over to her husband's family. In her Autobiography, published by Mr. Khāsta-

gir, her grandson-in-law, she has given a detailed account of her married life. We gather that she had a well formed figure with features of classic regularity, covered in a skin of the fairest Indian tint ; and, as the Rev. P. C. Mazumdār writes, “wearing over all her handsomeness the sacred veil of classical Hindu modesty, the daughter-in-law of the great Rām Kamal Sen was the cynosure of all eyes in the little village, and the envy of many a girlish heart.”* But she did not know what conceit was like. Brought up in a Hindu household where the joint patriarchal family system has prevailed from time out of mind, the girl wife, perhaps the youngest member of the family, had to be under the superior guardianship of the sole mistress of the family, the queenly mother-in-law. Next came the minor control of her sisters-in-law, the widowed daughters of the family, and a number of old aunties. But there was a valuable training in this beneficial juniority in her position. Devi Sāradā Sundari trained herself to the virtues of patience, humility and self-sacrifice at this early age which stood her in good stead when the appalling helplessness of widowhood came upon her before she was barely thirty years old.

* Life of Keshab Chandra Sen. P. 45.

III

Dewan Rām Kamal was a sincere Vaishnab. Rich and respectable, judged by the earthly standard of wealth and position, Dewan Rām Kamal lived the life of a strict ascetic in the midst of all his wealth. Though in the world, he was not of the world. His austere asceticism in food, drink and clothing, in his rearing up of his sons and grandsons whom he certainly loved as the steward loves his master's things but never claims them for his own, his calm resignation to God Almighty in the series of his family bereavements,—all these showed that he was a truly pious man with a heart full of other-worldliness. There are reasons to believe that he was not superstitious, and his spirit at times rose as high as the lofty heights of the simple religion of nature. Devi Sārādā Sundari was his pet, for the native sweetness of her disposition was irresistible. This saintly man trained the girl in the ways of piety and reverence. “For what do you pray to the god whom you worship?” enquired the old man one day of his daughter-in-law. “Do you pray to have the blessings of wealth, of children, of earthly advancement?” “Why, yes,” replied

Sāradā Sundari, “for we know not what else to pray for.” “There is something else, the only thing to pray for,” said the old man in reply,—“Pray to Him for grace to be saved. Say, save me here, Father, save me hereafter.”*

Her husband, Peary Mohan Sen, was a very charitably disposed and pure-minded man. As a fond husband he tried his best to keep Sāradā Sundari as comfortable as the circumstances of the family would allow after the death of the illustrious Rām Kamal, which took place about 1844. But the family now fell on evil days and Peary Mohan followed his father into the other world only four years after (1848). Devi Sāradā Sundari was now left a helpless widow with a dependent family of three sons and as many daughters, and her second son Keshab Chandra was the famous founder of the Theistic Church of the New Dispensation in India. The tale of her widowhood, the trials and privations she had to undergo, the indignities of the world she had to suffer, the long life of patience and faith in the wisdom of Providence and her final triumph over the vicissitudes of an ever change-

* Autobiography. pp. 8-9.

ful world form a glorious chapter in the annals of womanhood in India.

IV

Inspite of the crosses the widow had to bear in her life,—and their names were a legion—the children of Sārādā Sundari began to grow and thrive. The maintenance and education of the fatherless children now devolved upon their uncle Hari Mohan Sen, elder brother of Peary Mohan. “I was reared,” says Keshab Chandra, “by a wealthy father and grandfather. Opulence and luxury surrounded my childhood.....”*

It must be said to the credit of Babu Hari Mohan that he, too, loved his nephews with all the love of a father,—nay, more than his own children. He brought them up with as much care as the somewhat reduced circumstances of the family would allow, so that the boys might not feel the death of their father. They were put in the Hindu College, the aristocratic institution in the Presidency, noted at the same time for the high quality of instruction imparted. Keshab was the most clever scholar in his form, and his progress in studies was extraordinary. He was

* Life and Teachings of Keshab Chandra Sen (Mazumdār) pp. 48.

singularly intelligent, and his associates felt the influence of the remarkable purity of his moral character. A student yet, Keshab Chandra gave promise of the vigorous manhood that was to pour upon the land of his birth its richest treasures of intellectual and spiritual wealth. The report of Keshab's progress reached the ears of the mother who sent up her grateful thanks to the feet of the Almighty for the darlings of her heart, the only treasures left to console her in her widowhood.

V

But while winning his laurels at the temple of learning, Keshab Chandra was laying the strong foundations of a pure character. He hated the immorality of the times. He looked around and found himself enveloped in the darkness of the prevailing godlessness. The recently imported English education comprising the Literature, Science and Philosophy of England had unsettled the mind of young Bengal, and left an empty void,—nay, a chaos instead. The influence of Macaulay, DeRozio, Duff and Richardson was plainly at work. It laid the axe at the root of Hindu bigotry, but there being no positive system of faith to replace it, all sense

of religion was blotted out, and the English educated youngmen of Bengal drifted away disorderly, in large numbers, year after year, into unbelief and immorality. It was not Hindu nature, but the culture of a foreign soil favouring a system of godless education through an excess of zeal and occasional indiscretion bred distempers in young Bengal, tending to denationalize the Hindus. Idolatry, caste and superstition were vanishing fast, but they were taking away the national character with them. The teachings of ancient Hindu Philosophy were shunned as "transcendental nonsense", and came to be supplanted by Scepticism, Agnosticism, Positivism or militant Atheism. It was an age of immorality generated in the boiling cauldron of an ill-digested civilisation taking away all religion, idolatrous or otherwise, in a process of rapid evaporation.

VI

In times such as these Keshab Chandra was born and brought up. Society was evidently in the throes preceding the birth of a new spirit,—a spirit that was to bring order where chaos was reigning, and stability where wavering and vacillation held the sway. Young Keshab Chandra was an enthusiast. He knew that

coldness in religion meant death, and warmth was life. So, he kept the sacred torch of enthusiasm burning in and around him, in the society in which he lived and moved. Guided by his enthusiasm, guided by his pre-eminently intellectual and spiritual nature, guided, lastly, by his firm faith in God, Keshab Chandra wanted to develop a system of religion in perfect accord with the great religious systems of the world, with the essence of Hinduism purged of idolatry and bigotry and perfected in a synthetic union with the teachings of other religions. This he looked upon as the highest mission of his life.

We should now discuss the influence of his home on the religious life of Keshab Chandra who was born, as we have seen, in an orthodox Vaishnava family. There he could not expect to have his reformed views heard with any degree of approval. The late Babu Hari Mohan Sen, head of the family, was stern and overbearing*; he would, on no account, tolerate the least wavering from the ancestral creed. There was the family prestige to maintain : Keshab Chandra must yield on points connected with the time-honoured faith of the family. So, a regular

* Biography of Kesbab Chandra (Mazumdar) P. 64.

campaign of persecution was organised against that black sheep of the family, when he refused to accept the idolatrous initiation into the Vaishnava cult from the spiritual preceptor of the family. Keshab Chandra resisted heroically; he obeyed the mandate from within, and his firmness disarmed the blind orthodoxy of the Sens. The ceremony of initiation had to go without Keshab Chandra.

VII

We are more concerned with the attitude of Devi Sārādā Sundari in this connexion; it was worthy of the mother of the great reformer. We have it on the authority of the biographer of Keshab Chandra that he had indirectly showed his unwillingness before his mother * to receive his initiation from a man whom he did not venerate, and into idolatry which he hated with the hatred of hell. Devi Sārādā Sundari understood that young Keshab Chandra was passing through a great crisis of faith, and she saw it was illogical, tyrannical, nay immoral to force a faith upon a spirit that was soaring far above forms or ceremonials. Alluding to this revolt

* Life and Teachings of Keshub Chandra (Mazumdar)—P. 63.

of Keshab Chandra against domestic authority, his mother tells us in her Autobiography, "It had been decided that my nephews Mohin and Jogin and my son Keshab would receive their initiation on the same day from the family preceptor. The Guru came, and great preparations were made in view of the celebration. The great day dawned, but Keshab was found missing from the morning. He had fled for refuge into the arms of his friend Devendra Nath Tagore. He stayed away for the whole day. I thought he had gone to embrace Christianity. I gave up food and drink. My son returned late in the evening, and felt mortified at my distress. Softly he approached me and putting a book and a piece of paper into my hand went away as quietly as he came. I opened and read the verse :

'Whom do you belong to—Who is yours ?

Whom can you call your own ?

*'Tis the drowsiness of a dream you are
dreaming,—*

An illusion, to be sure.'

When I read the verse a change came over my feelings. The fragment of the verse I yet remember. I rose up and went to the Guru

with the book and the paper. That holy man read the verse and said, 'If this be the religion of your son, then, to be sure, he will be a great man, and people will flock to him to hear his words. Don't be sorry for your son'. Hearing these words of the Preceptor, I was greatly consoled." *

VIII

Devi Sārādā Sundari, though herself a staunch follower of the ancient orthodox creed of the family, though observing faithfully the details of the ascetic life of a Hindu widow, was never a narrow-minded bigot. Her views were sufficiently advanced to harmonize with, nay to encourage, when necessary, the principles of the reformed faith of her son. Alluding to the conversion of her son she says,† "I had to suffer a good deal for his conversion to Brahmoism. Abuse came in torrents upon my head from my husband's brother,—there was no end of persecution—not a single day passed but found me in an agony of tears. There were occasions when the late Babu Hari Mohan would simply

* Translated from the Autobiography of Devi Sārādā Sundari—Pp. 69-70.

† Translated from her Autobiography—P. 68.

lose his temper and tell me no end of unkind things, only because I did not take Keshab to task for his advanced opinions on religion. I also felt at times that Keshab was perhaps doing wrong, though I have ceased to look upon it in that light.”

That the mother of Keshab Chandra did not care a straw for taunts and persecutions when she thought of supporting the cause of Truth is amply borne out by her attitude when Keshab Chandra celebrated the *Jāta Karma* or formal thanksgiving for the birth of his first child. It was a Brahmo ceremony which Keshab Chandra wanted to hold in the ancestral house in Calcutta. Keshab knew that it would offend the religious susceptibilities of his relations, most of whom professed the orthodox faith. But he determined to vindicate his rights. Thus writes* the biographer of Keshab Chandra in his usually charming style, “ * * * * * The discomfited orthodox Sens found that everything went on with the most offensive success in spite of all they could do. On the morning of 11th January, 1863, when the ceremony was appointed to take place, the *tomtoms* began to beat, and

* Life and Teachings of Keshab Chandra Sen (Mazumdār)—P. 85.

the *sānāi* piped with vigour, the *nahabat* gave out its far-reaching strains, the flowers and garlands were being hung up in heaps, and the outraged relatives felt it was growing altogether too hot for them. So, this time instead of trying to exile Keshab, they exiled themselves. They entreated the irrepressible bandsmen to give a moment's truce to their clamorous instruments, for to their heart the unseasonable music was like insult added to injury ; and in the temporary lull, they beat a hasty retreat, clearing out of the house with women, children, servants, bag and baggage all. *Only Keshab's mother remained with him."*

The italics are ours. How could a dependent Hindu widow act in defiance of the wishes of the head of the family if she was not morally certain that she had right on her side ? She did not desert her son, though the world forsook him,—she did not desert the side of Truth.

IX

The mind of Devi Sārādā Sundari was singularly free from the taint of orthodoxy. Harmony and toleration marked her whole attitude towards religion. Her devout piety proceeded from her reverence for the supreme Godhead and her

real, living faith in religion. Hers was a soul illumined with the true light of faith. There was no darkness there ; no cobwebs in a hidden corner for dirt to settle in. Everything there was neat, and clean, and straight. To such a spirit Sectarianism appeals in vain and discord seems incomprehensible. To the mother of Keshab Chandra there was no Hindu, no Christian, no Brahmo, no Mahomedan—no religious system as such, differing one from the other. Every system harmonized, and revealed a unity in diversity which has always differentiated the saints of the ages throughout the world. Every religion came in for its due share of regard and esteem ; none for slight, far less for hatred. Brought up between the orthodoxy of her father's people, worshippers of *Sakti** and that of her husband's people who were votaries of Vishnu, Devi Sāradā Sundari had ample opportunities of finding out the harmony that existed between the two conflicting branches of the Hindu religion, ever at loggerheads in matters great and small, concerning the forms of worship. The great principle of toleration which she imbibed when young was the key note to her religious life.

* This is the Female Principle in the Hindu idea of Godhead, the incarnation of Force.

X

It will be interesting to note in this connection how rational her views were with regard to religion. Alluding to the pilgrimage she made to Puri, when a young widow, she herself tells us—

“We also stretched ourselves across the route of the great chariot of Jagannāth, the rope of the car touching our heads. I thought that thereby I acquired great religious merit. But I have now ceased to look upon it in that light. It was a childish fancy then. Even now also I visit holy shrines, but not exactly with a view to acquire religious merit. It is good, no doubt, to visit shrines. It is, however, something like the fondness of parents for children—just as I am fond of my pets, and nothing more. Penances and pilgrimages are mere forms, to be sure,—only the crust and not the kernel ; yet there is pleasure in their doing. However, I do not believe that these will save me. There can be no salvation for the soul that is unclean. The heart must be purged of all its impurity. ...From a little bride upwards I have been brought up in the religious atmosphere of this house. I have never seen an impious deed done—never found a wicked thought indulged in. Every moment of my life had something good to

engage me. Gradually the formalities of religion came in with their peculiar fascination and finally created in me a passionate longing for visiting holy shrines. Even now I do various *Pujahs*,...but I believe in the heart of my hearts that there is one Formless God, and I cannot be saved without His grace. I am not positive if image worship cannot bring salvation ; but it is my settled conviction that my own depends on my worshipping Him whom no form can bound. I do not hope to be saved. I only wish to resign myself to His will—if.....If my surrender to Him is complete and sincere I do not care where I go to—Heaven or Hell it does not matter.” *

XI

A sweetness of disposition and a genuine motherly tenderness formed the dominant note of her domestic life. Sympathy, it has been said, is a universal solvent, and Devi Sāradā Sundari possessed a superabundance of this heavenly quality. Her heart would melt at the sight of suffering and distress. Whenever she heard of a case of illness, she would drag herself to the bedside, even if the strength of her limbs would fail her. Her purse, slender as it grew in

* Autobiography—Pp. 31-32.

her widowhood, was always ready to open at the call of charity; and she gave till she had nothing more to give. Her old maid-servant Tārā was an object of her regular charity. She would even take her to the distant places of pilgrimage which she made. The biographer of Keshab Chandra thus writes of her*—“The *Gurus* and the Brahmins looked up to her for encouragement; the old servants and decayed relatives hoped for consolation from her. Her wonderful piety and greatness of disposition gave her an insight into subjects which are sealed to the purblind vision of half-educated young ladies. Her unrestricted sympathies have endeared her to her orthodox relatives as well as the members of the Brahmo Samāj.” Indeed, the mother of Keshab Chandra never knew an enemy, nor ever created one. During the partition of the family property she was legally advised to sue the late Hari Mohan Sen for her share of the hard cash, about Rs. 15,000/- left her by the will of her husband. But she stoutly refused. We glean the following from her Autobiography†—“I did not know what litigation was. I shuddered at the name. My share

* Life and Teachings of K. C. Sen (Mazumdār)—P. 46.

† Translation of an extract—P. 61.

of the money and that of Krishna Behāri never came out, for I refused to invoke the aid of the law. Was money, I argued, the one thing needful? Should I send him to jail by pressing for the money?" At the decline of her life, when she fell into distress, she never repented of the generous impulse that prompted her to the sacrifice which was indeed great for a woman to make.

XII

The life of Devi Sāradā Sundari was a long life of uncomplaining toil, a life of ungrudging service to those around, thankless for the most part, as is generally the lot of Hindu widows. She did not care for the buffets of fortune; trials and persecutions came thick and fast; bereavements darkened her doors in quick succession,—but did that heroic soul break down under calamity? During her lifetime she lost all her sons and daughters—sons renowned like Keshab Chandra and Krishna Behāri—and a good many grand-children besides,—but her firm faith in the wise dispensation of Providence kept her from giving way to vain regrets and useless complaining. Speaking of herself in the evening of her life, when preparing for her last

journey into the land of The Unknown, she says*—"Joy and sorrow must visit alternately the numerous branches of my large family of relations and grand-children. They are now a daily occurrence, and I receive the reports every day. God never gives me happiness without misery, or misery without its twin-born happiness. But the fire of the ordeal has taken away all the alloy from me, and placed me beyond the reach of misery and happiness. I find one branch of the family aspiring to a Rāj and the other branch homeless and penniless. So, neither can joy elate, nor sorrow depress my spirits. Looking upon the whole thing as the wise dispensation of Providence, I have ever been waiting here, surrounded by my large family, for that great day, keeping my both eyes ready—one for the tears of joy and the other for those of sorrow."

XIII

We cannot conclude without expressing our deliberate opinion that Devi Sārādā Sundari was constantly before Keshab Chandra as the embodiment of all the virtues of Hindu womanhood,—that she loomed larger, as years rolled

* Autobiography—P. 100.

on, as the great force to keep in tact his conservative instinct which worked like a ballast in his march of progress, steadied by circumspection and wisdom, which would make a correct estimate of the actual situation but never lacked the courage to face difficulties in the pursuit of the ideal,—the conservative instinct that eventually grew into sturdy nationalism. It was this nationalism that found expression in his fervid utterances, in glowing terms, of the glories of the East, the mother of Prophets and Religions. Its lofty idealism prompted him to say in the farewell *soirée*, organised in England on the eve of his departure from her shores after a half year's victorious campaign,—“Farewell, the western wing of my Father's Home. Farewell, the land of Shakespeare and Milton, Newton and Faraday ! I came an Indian, I go back a *confirmed* Indian !” The writer very humbly ventures to say that it was Devi Sāradā Sundari who was before Keshab Chandra as an inspiring presence and an enchanting personality, full of the grace and beauty of the Spirit, when he painted in glorious colours before his English audience the woman and Hindu family, with mother and wife as the presiding deities, and presented his new

religion of Harmony in its national garb, broad-based on national character. It was certainly the influence of his mother that was the reckoning factor when Keshab Chandra introduced Hindu rituals and symbolism into the New Church, divested of all superstitious incrustations, with a new life and a new spirit breathed into it, to become the vehicle of the new thought and the physical support of the new Spiritual culture. Devi Sārādā Sundari was before Keshab Chandra, when he wrote the *Nava Samhitā* to embody the reawakened and renovated soul of India in a new form of life of the new Aryans of the Brahmo Samāj, and worked out a new scheme of education and family training for the women, as a protest against the on-rush of the unsexing spirit of "New woman" imported from the West. 'In these days of revolutionary innovation,' writes Mr. Jogendra Lal Khāstagir in his admirable foreword to his edition of the autobiography of Keshab's mother, 'at this dawn of the waking nationality, Keshab's mother stepped forward as its representative, and said, "My child Keshab, look back to your own home ; now it is not the same country and the same home as you left some years ago. The name of the Supreme

Brahma, the God of Truth and Righteousness, is extolled everywhere from corner to corner in this vast Indian continent. Come back, my child, come home, I tell you.” In the voice of his mother Keshab Chandra heard the voice of his Supreme Mother. He returned home and found a hearty welcome for him and his new faith.....Thus with the help of his mother Keshab dressed the New Church in the national garb, and placed it before the new and waking nationality.....I firmly believe that a grateful posterity will one day remember the name of Sāradā Sundari for the great service she has done to the country.’ Thus, with his mother’s help Keshab Chandra expounded his sublime faith to his nation, to the masses of Hindu India that came to follow his lead. It was thus that the great reformer foreshadowed the future Hindu Church of India combining in itself the essence of the religious teachings of Europe and Asia alike, making it Universal, built on the bed-rock of national life.

XIV

Such is the short story of the great life of a Bengali widow who passed away from our midst at the ripe old age of eighty-eight (1907), retain-

ing the use of all her faculties unimpaired and enjoying a fairly good health up to the end of her life. The reader must not look for any dramatic incidents or romantic developments in this true tale of the secluded life of a Hindu widow ; for then he will be disappointed. She did not make the temporal history of her nation ; but, if man or woman has ever exerted a silent influence upon the uplifting of a nation by "instruction in action," Devi Sārādā Sundari has done her part admirably by leaving the firm impress of her saintly character on all around her.

Her tenderness, her patient resignation, her piety, her asceticism and the catholicity of her religious views produced their natural effect on the character of her great son Keshab Chandra, and it will not be a presumption to state that for the music of harmony which the genius of Keshab Chandra discovered among the various seemingly conflicting religious dispensations of the world, and the toleration he preached through the system he evolved, he was indebted to his mother more than to any body else. The biographer of the great reformer is not inclined "to flatter popular prejudice by tracing Keshab Chandra Sen's greatness to his mother". Yes, Keshab's genius was his own ; it was his indivi-

duality, the special gift of God ; but, for his mental cast and make-up, his virtues and character, he was indebted more to his mother than all others. When the great reformer was writhing in agony on his bed before his final emancipation from his exile in this land of tears, Devi Sāradā Sundari moaned in the bitterness of her heart. “The pain,” she cried, “is the result of my sins ; the righteous son suffers for the wretched parent’s unworthiness.” “Say not so, do not say so, mother dear,” came the response from the dying son, “where can there be another mother like you ? Have I not inherited your virtues ? Your virtues God has given me. All that I call my own is yours.” * Was it simply a hollow courtesy that escaped his lips, was it a mere formal phrase that he uttered to flatter the vanity of a woman, when he knew that he was entering the presenee of his Maker ? An emphatic ‘No’ answers the question. Nay, all through life, in town-hall narrations and parlour-talk, in the company of friends and in family circle as in Durbars and formal gatherings, Keshab was ‘tremendously real’ ; there was no sham or show

* Life and Teachings of K. C. Sen (Mazumdār)—P. 47 and P. 281.

about him. There can, therefore, be no greater testimony than his own words to what the great reformer owed to his mother in the formation of his saintly character.

Devi Sārādā Sundari has gone to her eternal rest, but her life is an inspiring book of precepts, an ever-living ideal to tell us that with a handful of such mothers living at a time in a country to teach and to guide, the nation will surely and speedily reach the goal of self-realization.



MAHĀRĀNI SWARNAMAYI, C. I.

(PUBLIC SPIRIT).

I

Poor Rāmtanu Mandal, a village grocer, had a daughter, born to him in 1828. * At her birth no music regaled the ears of friends and neighbours ; the news did not find its way to the columns of a newspaper ; nor was the event hailed with anything like the blowing of a conch-shell or the raising of a joyous shout of *Ulu Ulu*, commonest and cheapest expression of rejoicing in favour with the womenfolk of Bengal on such occasions. On the other hand, the poor father smelt ruin ahead in anticipation of an immediate strain on his slender purse, and the prospective exactions of the money lender ten years hence ; for her marriage, if the girl would

* Major Walsh makes it 1838. Evidently, this is a 'printer's devil' ; for when the Major admits that her husband Rājā Krishna Nāth died in 1844 (History of Murshidabad, P. 207.), it is clear that he could not have married an infant to leave her a child widow at the age of six. Though differently stated by different writers as 1824, 1827 and 1837, I have reasons to assume that she was born in 1828.

live to marry at all, was sure to turn him out of his ancestral homestead.

But the baby thrived in her village home at Bhattakul in Burdwān, though she was not born with even so much as a 'brass' spoon in her mouth. For she was the special care of Providence ; and poor Rāmtanu did not know that the girl Sārādā Sundari would live to become one of the greatest ladies of modern Bengal.

For who has not heard the name of Mahārāni Swarnamayī, C.I., a house-hold word in Bengal for her unbounded liberality and public spirit ? It is of absorbing interest to attempt a sketch, however meagre and incomplete, of the life of this large-hearted Bengali woman,—if only to show that greatness may be born equally in a lowly hut or a princely mansion, irrespective of time and space, or caste and colour.

II

Krishna Kānto Nandi, better known as "Kānto Baboo" in Bengal, was connected through business with the English Factory at Cossimbāzār. A very clever lad, Krishna Kānta made himself highly useful to the Company's Officers, and was very soon taken in as native assistant and interpreter at the Factory. Thus

he became acquainted with Mr. Warren Hastings, then Chief Assistant at the English Residency. The story runs that Hastings incurred the displeasure of Nawāb Sirāj-ud-Daullāh for a piece of indiscretion, and in his flight for safety had to take shelter with his friend “Kānto Baboo.” Krishna Kānto gave him a night’s lodging at the risk of his own life, saved him from the Nawāb’s wrath by stowing him away in a lumber room and giving his hungry friend a dish of stale rice and some roasted crabs to dine off. When Hastings rose to eminence, he did not forget the saviour of his life. Kānto Baboo became his Dewān or Chief native Secretary. Fortune led him by the hand. Through the favour of Mr. Warren Hastings,* afterwards Governor-General of the Company’s possessions in this country, Kānto Baboo thrived well and became the founder of the illustrious Cossimbāzār Rāj. He took the tide in his affairs “at the flood,” which led him on to fortune. It was good luck for the country that the industry of this native banian of Warren Hastings was so lavishly rewarded; for an ever-flowing stream of charity, fed at the perennial fountain of Kānto Baboo’s diligent acquisi-

* Major Walsh, I. M. S., History of Murshidābād, P. 206.

tions, was to flood the homes of the Bengali poor through the representatives of his house, chief among whom was Mahārāni Swarnamayī, C.I., of blessed memory.

III

The marriage of Sārādā Sundarī did not cost her parents a bit of the trouble anticipated. The girl was pretty, and gave early promise of a rich womanhood combining much talent with gentleness, goodness and dignity. About this time the people of the Cossimbāzār Rāj family were thinking of a match for the young Rājā Krishna Nāth Rāi Bāhādur, fourth and last of the direct line from the founder. As Dewān Krishna Kānto had originally migrated from Burdwān,* the family naturally looked for a suitable bride from among their own caste-people in their native district. The selection was made, and Sārādā Sundarī, renamed Swarnamayī, suddenly found herself elevated to her place as the mistress of one of the richest families in Bengal.

The change in her name and social position did not affect her temperament. Her husband, the enlightened Rājā Bāhādur, was blest in his

* N. N. Rāy—Murshidābād Kāhini, P. 419.

little wife who proved to be a veritable ministering angel in the domestic circle. But Rājā Krishna Nāth though generous in a noble cause was extravagantly lavish with his money, and squandered away all his accumulated wealth in a very short time. He had, moreover, an extremely unruly temper which hastened his ruin.* The Rājā was implicated in a criminal offence, and to avoid the ignominy of an open trial made an end of his life on 31st October, 1844.†

It was a very rude shock to Swarnamayī when she found herself a widow at the prime of her life. She had no son; two daughters were born to her, but one predeceased her father.‡ As a member of an orthodox Hindu family she was condemned to the horrors of perpetual widowhood. Her sun went down while the noon was yet to close.

As the last drop to the cup of her sorrow, the Hon'ble the East India Company took under attachment the whole property of the Cossimbāzār Rāj on the strength of a will purported to have been executed by the Rājā on the day

* Major Walsh, I. M. S., History of Murshidābād, P. 207.

† N. N. Rāy—Murshidābād Kāhini, P. 487.

‡ The other daughter died after marriage, but without issue. Walsh—*Ibid*, P. 208.

previous to his death. The cup of her misery was filled to overflowing.

IV

The young Hindu widow did not, however, break down under the heavy load of her misfortunes that "came in battalions." She faced the situation with the courage of one who had had smooth sailing over a very rough and risky sea of trouble. But funds were sadly wanting, and in her distress she appealed to some wealthy friends for help. None came forward to advance her cause. On the contrary, several unscrupulous persons to whom she applied, bent on making a bargain out of her helplessness, demanded the lion's share of the property when recovered. Rāni Swarnamayī was more than in a fix.

But the darkest night, they say, is nearest dawn, and the tribulations of the lady were about to end. The sacrifice of a single magnanimous soul has more than once acted as the redeeming grace of the world by atoning for the lapses of the millions. A gentleman named Hara Chandra Lāhiri, connected with the liberally minded Goswāmis of Serāmpur, was moved to pity at the plight of the dispossessed

Rāni. It was a voluntary offer of sacrifice that he made. He expected no reward, and demanded no brokerage,* and himself having had no surplus wealth to spare, raised a decent loan on the mortgage of his daughter's property. Babu Hara Chandra befriended the helpless widow in the darkest days of her trial, and the name of that large-hearted gentleman will go down to posterity so long as the benefactions of Mahārāni Swarnamayī will live in history.

The law-suit dragged on for more than two years before the Supreme Court of Judicature, and created a great sensation in the land. Very able Counsels were engaged by the Rāni. These learned men of law thoroughly established that Rājā Krishna Nāth was of unsound mind before his death. The finding of the judges, therefore, was that the last will of the Rājā could not be valid. So, the highest Court of Civil Justice in the country ordered the restoration of the property to the widow of the late Rājā (Nov. 15, 1847).* The troubles of the lady came to an end.

V

The Rāni found the property in a state of chaotic disorder when possession was restored to

*Walsh, *Ibid*—P. 208, footnote.

her. To form an idea of the vastness of the estate and the difficulty of its management, we must remember that it lay scattered in several districts* separated from one another by rivers and hills and forest tracts in the days of the *Company Bāhādur* when communication was difficult and travelling expensive. The Rāni being, moreover, a woman having had no sincere adviser among her own relations, the situation became far from enviable. To add to this, the heavy expenses of costly litigation, raised on loans from time to time, sat upon the estate as a nightmare. In her distress she looked about for a friend to help her in the administration, and she selected Babu Rājiblochan Rāi, a subordinate officer of the Rāj, who offered to assist at the management.

Dewān Rājiblochan justified her selection. He understood at a glance how difficult the charge was. But like his mistress he was energetic, persevering, sagacious and tactful in business affairs. The Dewān was noted for his thorough grasp of administrative questions ; and

* S. C. Mitra—Comprehensive Bengali Dictionary—article on “Swarnamayī”, P. 873. Rungpur, Dinājpur, Burdwān, Nadiā, Birbhum, Pābnā, Murshidābād, Faridpur, Rājshāhi, Bogrā, 24-Parganās, and a *Jāgir* in Ghāzipur (The United Provinces) bestowed upon Kānto Baboo by Warren Hastings.

his considerate treatment of the *raiyats* was not the least of the manifold qualities of head and heart that endeared him to the public as well as to the Rāni. With his prudent management of the estate disorder vanished, the debts were on their way to liquidation, and prosperity came back to the Cossimbāzār family in no time. Thus, when the estate was restored to its pristine prosperity, the Rāni, at the instance of her Dewān, embarked upon a scheme of useful works for which she will be remembered by posterity for ages to come.

VI

Her charities, public and private, are too numerous to be exhausted in a sketch like this. The following sentence of Major Walsh admirably puts the whole thing in a nutshell: "To her no charity appealed in vain; she was indeed the Baroness Burdett Coutts of Bengal." With more than a prince's wealth at her absolute disposal, she did not spend a single farthing on personal luxury. Setting apart a portion of her revenues for the cost of the management, she spent what remained in works of munificence. In 1874 there was a famine in North Bengal, and the benevolent lady unloosed her purse-

strings and made a voluntary gift of one lakh and twenty-five thousand rupees for the relief of the distressed. There was scarcity in Calcutta in 1876; distress in Murshidābād in the same year, followed by a terrible famine in Madras (1877). The wails of distress reached her ears, and she could not eat a mouthful if she could not save a fellow-brother from starvation. In relieving the distress of her famished countrymen alone her donations amounted to between four and five lakhs of rupees.

Her charity and public spirit brought her prominently to the notice of Government. The title of *Mahārāni* was conferred on her as a personal distinction in 1871. Her distinguished services to the cause of famine-stricken people brought her a fresh reward in the shape of a pledge from Government that the title of *Mahārājā* would be revived in her heir. A further mark of the recognition of her public spirit came in January, 1878, when Her Most Gracious Majesty, the late Queen Empress Victoria, admitted her to the Order of the Crown of India. In handing over to the Mahārāni the Insignia of the Order together with the Royal letters-patent, the Divisional Commissioner in an open Durbār at Cossimbāzār on August 14th, 1878, enumer-

ated the great services rendered by the Mahārāni to the cause of humanity : she had already spent eleven lakhs of rupees in voluntary gifts and donations up to the year 1877.

VII

It must not be supposed, however, that this exhausted the list of her donations, for many more lakhs were yet to follow in the years to come. The lady students of the Calcutta Medical College had no comfortable hostel accommodation. This long-felt want was removed by the Mahārāni who came forward with the magnificent donation of one lakh for the construction of a building for the purpose. The authorities of the Campbell Medical School, Calcutta, were also accommodated with a donation of ten thousand rupees towards the fund for the building of the school hostel. Over and above, she spent large sums of money in building and endowing schools and sanskrit *Tols*, in digging wells and excavating tanks and founding hospitals and charitable dispensaries all over her estate.

Her private charities comprised the annual gift of winter clothing to Brāhmans, *sannyāsis*, *faqirs* and mendicants of every description, the distribution of palatable dishes to thousands of

the poor on the annual celebration of the *Annakuta** ceremony, the annual feeding of countless beggars on three consecutive days of the *Annapurnā* Poojah, the entertainment of Brāhmans on the death anniversary of Kānta Baboo, Mahārājā Lokenāth, Rājā Hari Nāth and Rājā Krishna Nāth, and annual grant of stipends to various learned Pandits of different districts all over Bengal. Besides these, there were charities in private, too numerous to mention; helpless widows belonging to the upper ranks of society, too retiring to make their petitions in person, found to their surprise that they were not forgotten by the Mahārāni when the steward came to them at the end of the month with a handsome allowance for their maintenance. Well may we repeat with the poet that in her case, too,

“Thus to relieve the wretched was her pride;
And even *her* failings leaned to virtue’s side.”

Poor students hailing from distant parts of the province were fed, lodged and educated at the expense of the Mahārāni, and there was a regular boarding-house establishment kept up free in the Cossimbāzār palace for students who

* Literally, a pyramid of eatables for distribution among the poor after it has been offered to a god.

could not afford to pay for their education. Indeed, students were her special concern : and that district in Bengal must be an unfortunate exception which does not enjoy, in some shape or other, an educational charity from the hands of the Mahārāni.* Thus the report that she spent about a lakh of rupees annually in private charities seems to rest on a solid foundation.

VIII

The people of Berhāmpur should be particularly grateful to the memory of the late Mahārāni Swarnamayi for her liberality. Two notable instances are selected. The Government of Sir Collin Campbell, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, was for reducing the status of the Berhāmpur College, the only institution in the district of Murshidābād, where instruction was imparted up to the B. A. standard of the Calcutta University. There were loud and emphatic protests from the people of Murshidābād, but

* Even when this humble tribute is being paid to her blessed memory the writer has his face towards the Krishnagar College standing on its spacious compound comprising 100 *Bighās* of rent-free land, the greater part of which forms the gift of the late Mahārāni Swarnamayi. When the writer remembers that he himself is an *alumnus* of that College, his grateful heart goes up to that departed soul for the benefit which he in common with many other students of the Nadiā district, has derived from the liberality of the late Mahārāni Swarnamayi.

Government unfortunately could not find their way to accede to the popular request to maintain the College as a first grade institution : want of funds stood in the way. Mahārāni Swarnamayī saved the situation, took over the management of the College in her own hands, and agreed to defray from the revenues of her estate the entire annual cost of twenty thousand rupees.

IX

Then comes her magnificent gift to Berhāmpur, the supply of pure drinking water to the public of Berhāmpur. The town was notoriously unhealthy some twenty years ago. Malaria, Cholera, Dysentery and Diarrhœa claimed a large toll of victims annually ; and though it is not a sanitarium to-day, the health of the town has admittedly improved with the introduction of pipe-water. The waterworks of Berhāmpur are an imperishable monument to the liberality of the Mahārāni. During the Collectorship of Mr. Kennedy in 1894, the Mahārāni agreed to remove the crying want of the Berhāmpur public by undertaking the whole cost of inaugurating the waterworks. Unfortunately, however, when the project was yet maturing she died in 1897. But her successor,

the present Mahārājā, carried out the dying wishes of his illustrious aunt, and the total cost amounting to three lakhs of rupees was met by the Cossimbāzār Rāj. His Honour Sir John Woodburn, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, in opening the waterworks on the 31st July, 1899, made a very appreciative reference to the public spirit of the late Mahārāni Swarnamayī, C. I. The opening paragraph from the address presented to His Honour by the Mahārājā Bāhādur will show how greatly appreciated by Government was the boon conferred by the Mahārāni upon the people of Berhāmpur:—

“Your Honour, ladies and gentlemen, on my own behalf as heir and successor to the late Mahārāni, as also on behalf of the Berhāmpur public to whom she made a gift of these works, I beg most respectfully to tender you my, as well as their, grateful thanks for the honour you have this day done to her memory; and I only regret that she is not alive to hear how kindly and eloquently her munificent liberality has been spoken of by the head of the local Government.”

X

But the day was approaching when this great benefactress of humanity was to be called away

to her seat among the *Immortals*, and receive her highest reward for having done her duty among the mortals of the earth. Through the agency of a frail woman the spirit of Love and Charity revealed itself for the benefit of mankind. Mahārāni Swarnamayī had ample opportunities at her disposal to benefit mankind, and posterity will judge whether she could tell her Maker if she had made the best of these opportunities. Doing her duty by her countrymen to the last moment of her life, the Mahārāni passed away on the 25th of August, 1897, full of years and full of honours, mourned by Hindus and Mahomedans alike. Her death has created a void in the ranks of the lady workers of Bengal, which will take time to fill. Ahalyā in *Mahārāshtra*, Bhawāni in *Bārendra* and Swarnamayī in *Rārha* are striking manifestations of the same spirit—the spirit of charity working through different agencies, at different times and different places. It is the self-forgetfulness of the legendary hero Harish Chandra working at this distance of time to show that Indian Mythology has realised its end through the history of the country.

May the great Soul of the departed Mahārāni rest in peace to see from her serene altitude that her mantle has fallen upon her worthy successor,

the Mahārājā Sir Manindra Chandra Nundi Bāhādur, who has kept up the glorious traditions of the Cossimbāzār House by emulating the generous impulses of his predecessor, the late Mahārāni Swarnamayī who was great in life, and greater yet in death in the grateful hearts of her countrymen.



AGHORE KĀMINI.*

(SERVICE TO FELLOWMEN).

I

We propose to take leave of our readers by presenting a very rapid sketch of the life and activities of a saintly Bengali woman who consecrated her entire self to the service of her race. Devi Aghore Kāmini, whose selfless devotion to the cause of humanity has secured her immortality in death, stood at the transition when the orthodox order of rigidity in Bengal was yielding fast at the magic touch of the New Light. Aghore Kāmini was a living manifestation of Hindu womanhood with a vast world-culture behind it, embodied in Hindu family life and social organisation, crystallised in traditions and organised into character. She showed, beyond dispute, to what height of noble self-sacrifice at the call

*For the materials of the life-story of this lady I am indebted to the very valuable account left by her husband in the book "Aghore-Prakāsh" published from Bānkipur.

of humanity the Indian woman, nursed and nurtured within the walls of family life, can rise up to, only when the walls are pulled down by the on-rush of surging life.

When the great soul of the illustrious Keshab Chandra was soaring in its noble flights in a search after the highest truth, rising far above all that was dross and filth, Devi Aghorekāmini, a humble servant of suffering humanity, by a simple impact with it, tore through the fetters of the inequality that held society in its bondage, and taking the world for her kin, showed how Indian womanhood could feel and live and die for mankind. The same spirit that animated the English lady and dispelled the gloom from the military hospital of Scutari, or which made that large-hearted Englishman visit all the prison cells of Europe and weep for their unfortunate inmates, travelled to the banks of the Ganges in distant Bengal and gave the world this nineteenth century lady saint who preferred to work in silence and lay down her life in the service of humanity in her own humble sphere of activity.

II

In May, 1856, Devi Aghorekāmini was born in a very respectable Kāyastha family of Sripur,

a small village in the 24-Parganās. When India was just emerging from the heat and dust of a serious military revolution, and Bengal was yet in the throes of the birth of a new spirit to welcome the recently imported culture of the West, Babu Bipin Chandra Basu in the cool atmosphere of an unaffected village home was bringing up his little daughter Aghorekāmini in the traditions of the ancient faith of his ancestors. Aghorekāmini was yet a playful child of ten years when her father in deference to the wishes of his castemen gave her away in marriage to Sreemān Prakāsh Chandra Roy, a promising youth of eighteen belonging to another well-known Kāyastha family of the same village. Sreemān Prakāsh Chandra was at the time a brilliant undergraduate in the Berhampur College, and afterwards rose to be an ornament of the Provincial Executive Service, Bengal. We cannot definitely state whether the husband or the wife gained relatively by the marriage; but this much we can safely assert that both gained immensely by their union, Prakāsh doing yeoman's service in widening the moral and intellectual out-look of his wife, while the deeply spiritual nature of Aghorekāmini nourished and fed the hungry soul of her

husband, and made their home like a miniature hermitage of ancient India. The twin souls thrived and developed side by side ; one supplemented the other ; and the Great Spirit revealed Himself in both with His saving grace to lead them to a life of perfection through self-consecration.

III

• About this time the doctrines of Brāhmoism propounded by the great Teacher Keshab Chandra appealed forcibly to the religious consciousness of young Bengal. When the educated native community of Calcutta, deeply imbued in the culture of the West, was drifting in a current of doubt and materialism like a ship without helm or rudder, the ardent spirit of Keshab Chandra saved the vessel from foundering by founding the New Church called “Bharatbarshiya Brāhmo Samaj ” (1869). It was the infant Catholic Church of Indian Theology : Keshab Chandra was the great apostle of the faith. His was a unique personality. A strict code of morals backed by his extraordinary reasoning and enlivened by sincerity, and a deep religious fervour that found its expression in a highly persuasive eloquence carried conviction into the

inmost depths of the soul. The advent of Keshab Chandra into Indian society was an epoch-making event in the history of the religious revival of India; it saved, on the one hand, many a westernised Bengalee from embracing Christianity; on the other, it rescued young Bengal from the Scylla of priest-craft and old-world fanaticism and the Charybdis of a life of drift and self-abandonment through loss of all faith. Keshab Chandra placed before his countrymen the eternal verities of life, and held up, in an intelligent and intelligible form, the creed of the ancient *Rishis*, essentially monotheistic and breathing in a spirit of toleration, nay, of harmony.



IV

Young Prakāsh Chandra came early under the indirect influence of this great Evangel of the Transition. The books of [Rajnārāin] set him thinking; the life and teachings of Keshab Chandra spurred him to action. The cravings of his soul were satisfied, and he found a safe asylum in the folds of the New Faith (1871). But difficulty was brewing under the paternal roof. Devi Aghorekāmini was at that time a meek and unobtrusive girl of fifteen. The

daughter-in-law of a respectable Hindu family of an orthodox type, she had to be under the strict guardianship of her husband's people, and could not hear much of the reformed faith of her husband who came home from College only once in two or three months. Though instructed by her husband in some of the broad principles of the reformed religion she could yet touch only the outer fringe of the Great Truth, and her soul was just now groping in the darkness of ignorance. The influence that was brought to bear upon her by her husband's occasional visits was greatly neutralized by the adverse influence of the home she was in, and the liberation was a very slow and tardy process. Fortunately, however, it was the darkness preceding the dawn, and the night is darkest when the dawn is nearest.

V

Passing through a series of vicissitudes in which Fortune did not show for him an excess of motherly solicitude, young Prakāsh Chandra found himself in the distant town of Motihāri, posted as a temporary Superintendent of Famine Relief (1875). The income was small, and the family moderately large, consisting of the husband, the wife, two daughters and two

dependent relatives. The difficulty was considerable in view of the fact that a large remittance, about half the monthly income, had to be sent home for the support of the mother of Prakāsh Chandra. But Aghorekāmini, now the mistress of the family, was never discontented ; it was not in the nature of that lady who was destined, in later years, to devote her little all to the good of her race.

VI

Motihāri, then, was the seed-plot of Aghorekāmini's future greatness. It was here that she imbibed the virtues of self-conquest and self-denial which marked her out as a great woman in the next twenty years of her life. There were splendid opportunities of study, meditation and prayer ; of ministering to the comforts of her husband, her children, of the entire family, generally speaking ; of denying herself the small comforts that as a young mother she might require from time to time. Under the fostering care of her husband, whose mention we can not dispense with if we seek to trace the vigorous growth of her soul, her spiritual advance was secure. But though life was regulated here as in a decent and quiet Brāhmo family,

Aghorekāmini was not yet a sister recognised by that religious fraternity. Prakāsh Chandra could not admit her into the folds, if he would.

But the messenger was come from the Land of Light with his message of Salvation. In an auspicious moment Saint Aghorenāth Gupta of Sāntipur, a famous itinerant preacher of the New Faith was on a visit to Motihāri at this time. His saintly life and lofty teachings were an inspiration to the couple and touched their inmost soul. Devi understood the hint and surrendered herself. Aghorekāmini was put on the way to the Temple of Truth (1876).

VII

At Motihāri Aghorekāmini first heard the trumpet call of Duty. The glimmerings of the Great Truth dawned upon her awakening sense and they brought in their train the unavoidable struggle, privations and sacrifice,—the trial of strength between Faith and Doubt, and the joy arising from the final triumph of moral conviction over the sarcastic taunts of irreverent Doubt. Though the circumstances of her husband did not improve to any very appreciable extent, though the circle of their dependants grew wider by the addition of the first male child of the

family and the inclusion of a helpless elder brother of Babu Prakāsh Chandra, though she was not spared the darts of persecution from the brother-in-law for the openness of her religious beliefs, yet she looked back with a glow of pride upon this period of her life, for it was her period of probation ; it gave her the necessary training for her vocation in life. So, with many a parting tear Aghorekāmini left her friends at Motihāri to join her husband at Bānkipur, where he had been transferred sometime ago as Inspector of Excise.

VIII

Bānkipur became the field of her manifold activities. The vigorous growth of her inner self made it abundantly clear to her that life was not worth living if it remained crippled within the narrow limits of the domestic circle. She understood that the sphere of the soul was an ever-widening arc, and that individual life was nothing if it could not burst through its narrow bounds to lose itself in the greater life of humanity. Henceforth we find Devi Aghorekāmini mixing in society and trying to make herself useful to suffering humanity. Her endeavour, therefore, was directed first to cur-

tail her personal comforts, that she might spare something for those in want ; next, to cultivate an inward strength of the mind, that the ordinary weaknesses of the human heart might not stand in the way of duty ; then, to replace the unnecessary shyness of a Bengali woman by an amount of courage and boldness, that she might visit the various walks of life without fear or delicacy ; lastly, to resign herself entirely to the Great Spirit, that she might do her duty, clear of any thought of consequence. In her pious resolve she was greatly aided by her friend the late Saudāmini Devi (Mrs. K. N. Roy) whose name stands for talent and culture in modern Bengal.



IX

With this sort of practical training for whatever little she could do to alleviate human misery Devi Aghorekāmini chalked out her own path in life. She had already renounced the use of costly dresses and ornaments, things which attract the minds of young women generally. Her valuable jewelleries were sent to procure relief for famine-stricken people ; instead of the fine cotton and silk for which she showed so much partiality as a girl she began

to wear the coarse and humble home-spun called *Mutiā* largely used by poor Bihāree women. Never was the costly *sāree* worn by her after her vow of renunciation, and when she sought an interview with the Commissioner of Patna on an errand of charity, the *Mutiā* was her dress for that private audience. That her youthful beauty might not be a block to the accomplishment of her desired end, she unhesitatingly cut off the locks of her curling hair, by no means an inconsiderable sacrifice for a young lady to make. To crown all, about this time she went through the vow of a spiritual wedding with her husband, which, in plain language, means that thenceforth and for all time to come the union between herself and her husband was to be a meeting between soul and soul, and not between flesh and flesh, a strict vow of celibacy in married life, hard to be observed when the married couple were in the prime of life, so to say (1882). The course of her training was now complete and the strength of the great soul of this ascetic, true to all relations of life, showed itself in various ways.

X

Trials now followed in rapid succession to put her strength to the test ; and they say that

strength is best tested when you watch by the bedside of a dying relative. In August, 1883, her second daughter fell seriously ill, and with all that the best medical help could do, the life of the girl was despaired of. The crisis came at 11 in the night, and when she lay hovering between life and death, the mother sat there, with a calm composure of mind, and smoothed the ruffled pillow as if nothing serious was going to happen. The poor father was miserable beyond description, and tears trickled down his pallid cheeks. As soon as Devi Aghorekāmini noticed it, she took her husband aside and said, "This is not the moment for weakness, dear. You forget the duty towards your daughter." Then they both sat to pray and rose with perfect mastery over the self. Fortunately the crisis passed, and the departing life came back. But who can say what pang it cost the mother to retain her self-possession at that moment of struggle between weakness and strength?

Shortly after the incident narrated above the second child of Dr. Pareshnāth Chatterje got cholera. The room in which the patient lay was ill suited for a sick chamber. Devi Aghorekāmini heard of this, and in response to the inward promptings of her soul she hastened to bring the

child over to her own lodgings. She nursed the dying child with her own hands. When she heard of a fresh attack in the same family, that patient was also removed into the family of Prakāsh Babu. The lady took entire charge of watching by the bedside, and it was due to her motherly care and nursing that both the children were brought back from death's door.

The seed of philanthropy planted years ago was beginning to blossom and bear fruit.

XI

In July, 1884, Babu Prakāsh Chandra was posted to Motihāri as Deputy Collector, and the family went back to the dear old place,—old faces, old associations and old memories revived with fresh ties of affection and love. But the five years at Bānkipur had wrought a miraculous change in the inner life of Devi Aghorekāmini; she came back chastened, ennobled and purified. The philanthropic impulse which first touched the core of that great heart while the lady was yet at Bānkipur found full play at Motihāri. Now she forgot the individual self and began to realize the greater, wider and fuller Self outside.

“Love took up the harp of life, and smote on
all the chords with might,
Smote the chord of self that, trembling,
passed in music out of sight.”

She took in the significance of true sympathy.

In 1886, a certain respectably connected young man, Hariguru Rudra by name, visited Motihāri after a sad bereavement, the loss of his wife. The acuteness of his grief was preying heavily on his youthful mind and sent him abroad disconsolate from place to place. Rudra sought shelter in the family of Devi Aghorekāmini at Motihāri, knowing it for certain that he would be allowed to drink his fill from that perennial fountain of love and sympathy. He was received by the lady with the greatest cordiality as a mother would receive her afflicted child. Her maternal solicitude and cheering words of consolation brought lasting comfort into the distressed heart of the young man. Rudra was a guest in the family for three or four years, and when he returned home chastened and consoled he ever remembered the kindness he had received from the lady far away from his native home. Money is not the greatest gift that one can make; there is yet another and

a still greater,—it is the giving of the self in a cool and refreshing stream of sympathy with the heart that is broken. Devi Aghorekāmini gave her self to console the heart that wept.

XII

By the end of the year 1886, Babu Prakāsh Chandra was at Bānkipur for the second time, and wherever there was Aghorekāmini there was an opportunity of doing a good turn to a neighbour. About this time, her acquaintance with the family of Mr. Ananda Chandra Chakravarty, a native Christian resident of Dināpur, gradually ripened into friendship; and when the sudden death of Mr. Chakravarty left his wife a helpless widow with a numerous family of dependent children, having no provision whatever for their maintenance, it was the sympathy of Mrs. Roy that supported the family at this bereavement. Her sympathy did not end in words; she rendered very valuable pecuniary assistance for the education of the minors.

Similar instances of unselfish endeavour to alleviate human misery are too numerous in the life of the lady to justify any selection. The limited space at our disposal will not allow us to mention any more. So we have to close this side

of her character here, namely, the doing of good to all who came in contact with her in private life. Hindu or Christian, friend or stranger, young or old, man or woman, everybody had a warm corner in her heart, and this was her mission in life.

XIII

But the greatest work of her life was yet to come. The mandate of the Lord had reached her heart; and she felt that she was required to divert her energies into a new channel,—namely, to ameliorate the condition of the women of her country. She was herself a woman, and who but a sympathetic woman was fitted for the task of improving the condition of her less fortunate sisters? She took her resolve. She would help to spread education among the ignorant women-folk of Bihār.

The task was difficult; more difficult than you can possibly imagine. With greater ease did Hercules set about turning the course of the stream to clean the Augean stable!

Picture a Bihāri girl in the early eighties, brought up in an atmosphere of blind superstition, immured in the pale shades of the zenana, steeped in the darkness of ignorance, forbidden

by custom from time out of mind to cross the mysterious bounds of the 3 R's.! Even the domiciled Bengali girl had not then the advantage of education worth the name.

Next, came the sad dearth of teachers,—female teachers being out of the question. The lady with whom the idea originated had not herself the training necessary for a teacher.

Thirdly, there was the monetary problem to solve. No pupil, no teacher, no house to locate the school, no encouragement from the public. Yet with all these initial disadvantages Devi Aghorekāmini faced the situation quite heroically, and the splendid institution, the Bānkipur Girls' High School from which the girls of Bihār are matriculating year after year, bears ample testimony as to how difficulties can be overcome even by a woman, if the work be done in good faith, in sincerity, with perseverance and a singleness of purpose. The story of her success is worth recording and worth hearing. Nay, it is an object lesson to all workers.

XIV

Devi Aghorekāmini analysed the situation. Her strong common sense told her that the task before her was not an ordinary one. It

was not simply the heart that could do it,—the brain must come in to its aid. A teacher, she thought, was not simply *born*; a teacher was both *born* and *made*. How could she educate the children if she had not herself the qualification. She would solve the second difficulty first; the other obstacles were not so serious to cope with. The pecuniary problem could not stand in the way if she had a few years more of life to live.

So she thought of joining Miss Thoburn's Women's College in Lucknow as a pupil-teacher with a view to get the necessary training. She was now thirty-five years old; she had a dependent family of children to look after; there was no other elderly female relative in the family, who could do it during her absence. Lastly, who would meet the cost of her training in the Women's College? The obstacles seemed insuperable,—but there was God overhead and her firm resolve within. People who heard of her plan did not think very highly of her sagacity. But they did not know her well; and, somehow or other, on February 27, 1891, Devi Aghore-kāmini was speeding away from the Bānkipur Station to become a boarding-scholar in the Women's College in distant Lucknow.

XV

The Superintendent of the College, Miss I. Thoburn, a large-hearted English lady, received her new scholar with great kindness, and was rather astonished at what she saw of this strange Bengali woman. Her courage, perseverance and firm faith in God impressed her deeply. As a very humble learner, she began every thing from the very beginning, so to say, and made very rapid progress in English, Hindi and Kindergarten. Her life as a boarding-scholar at Lucknow was one of strenuous exertion,—she devoted fourteen hours to study : to prayer and meditation, four ; and the remaining six she set apart for meals and sleep. As a pupil she conformed to all the rules and regulations of the institution. She readily submitted to the discipline, and gladly sat for the periodical tests of the college, and though Miss Thoburn was willing to relax, as a special case, some of the stringent rules in her favour, she objected to have the concessions.

Once during her stay at Lucknow she got the news of the serious illness of her eldest boy Subodh.* But instead of being the least upset

* Now Mr. S. C. Roy, Bar-at-Law, Calcutta High Court.

at the news, she retired to her prayer-room to hold communion with God who alone could save the situation. Even her maternal love could not make her flinch before duty. Fortunately the boy recovered and Devi Aghorekāmini offered her grateful thanks to God that her darling had been spared.

Lest her studies should be interfered with, she stopped correspondence with home for the rest of her term at College. It was not keeping term,—it was asceticism of the strictest order, and it had its reward. She took the full course of training extending over nine months, and with a very high certificate of proficiency from the Principal, she returned to Bānkipur on December 16, 1891.

XVI

Mrs. Roy found an enthusiastic ovation waiting for her at Bānkipur. It was a magnificent display. Were they receiving a conquering Field-Marshal returning home in the midst of his own people? Not that,—yet the music, the procession, the blowing of the auspicious conch-shell, the illuminations and street decorations proved the demonstration to be nothing less. Babu Prakāsh Chandra in speaking of this demonstration years

after was overpowered with emotion when he wrote in his book : "I did not know before that man could do so much for man."

In truth, Devi Aghorekāmini richly deserved the honour. A marvellous transformation was wrought in her during her residence in the Lucknow College. She reaped the rich harvest of a perfectly developed character. The expansion of the heart followed in the wake of the expansion of her mind. The company of learned ladies, great English ladies, bold and true, gave her strength and courage. The scope of her duty loomed larger before her eyes. She realized the high place of woman in the order of God's creation, and with this conscious, gradual self-realisation dawned that sense of self-respect, greater now than ever, which gave her such a dignified idea of her mission on earth. Over and above, she learned how to teach pupils, how to become a child with the children, and work her way into their affection by the gentle rule of love instead of the ever-dreaded rod of chastisement.

Mrs. Roy came back a changed woman, infinitely raised in the estimation of her countrymen, and no wonder that the men and women

of Bānkipur mustered strong to accord her an ovation.

XVII

On her return to Bānkipur Mrs. Roy found the already existing infant school for girls in a moribund condition. With the death of the mistress in November the school had almost ceased to work. By the middle of February, 1892, the number on the rolls had dwindled into less than a dozen infants, and the monthly subscription reached the vanishing point. At this juncture the late Hon. Mr. Guruprasād Sen requested the lady to take charge of the school with a view to improvement. But the charge involved a threefold liability. First, if there was no money, it had to be raised by an appeal to sympathetic friends, or to be met from her private purse ; secondly, if there were no pupils, Mrs. Roy would have to go on her canvassing rounds from house to house at Bānkipur, or outside, if necessary ; and thirdly, if teachers were not available she would have to make the necessary arrangements, and do the greater part of the teaching herself. In fact, the school was to be a personal concern of Mrs. Roy, especially as her own house had to be converted into a boarding-house for the girls.

XVIII

But the disadvantages detailed above could not deter the lady from making the start. She gladly took up this "love's labour." By the end of March the number of boarders rose to 29, besides 15 Bihāri girls sent as day-scholars by way of an experiment. The movement daily gained in sympathy and strength ; and, with the unceasing efforts of the lady the affairs of the school were put on a very sound basis. She was the life and soul of the institution—she was manager, teacher, superintendent, and what not ? She visited the mothers of the girls in their homes, looked after the health and comforts of her pupils, and did every thing that made for the welfare of the institution. Referring to this patriotic work of the lady the *Indian Spectator* in its issue of April 2, 1893, wrote the following eulogy :—

"By far the most notable institution, however, at Bānkipur, is an unpretentious Boarding-House, managed by a Brāhmo lady and her two daughters. Mrs. Prakāsh Chandra Roy is the wife of a gentleman who holds a respectable Government appointment and who is in well-to-do circumstances. At the age of 35* she and

* The statement seems to be inaccurate. The vow was taken when the wife was 26 and the husband 35.

her husband took the vow of Brahmacharyya, and both have religiously observed it up to date. With her husband's full consent Mrs. Roy went with her two daughters to Lucknow to study at Miss. Thoburn's institution there.....

Mrs. Roy speaks English fluently and is well read.

“Early in the morning the children in her home offer their prayers in their own simple way..... Each of the elder boarders is in charge of one or two of the younger, and each keeps a small diary in which she notes down every day her failings and backslidings, if any. The boarders attend the female school conducted under Mrs. Roy's supervision, and are helped in their studies at home by her and her daughters. The whole cost of education and boarding amounts to Rs. 7 and odd* per month. The children look blithe and lively, and the lessons of purity, self-help and self-sacrifice, taught to them by example and precept, are likely to have an enduring influence on their after-life. The boarding-house is not kept for profit; indeed the amount charged to the boarders is much less than the actual cost. The deficit is made up by

* About 10s. in current English coinage.

Mr. Roy who takes the deepest interest in the work of his wife and daughters."

XIX

It goes without saying that if Babu Prakāsh Chandra and his wife hesitated to convert their home into a boarding-house for the school the costly affair could never have been an accomplished fact, and the status of the Bānkipur Infant Girls' School never raised to that of the Premier Girls' High School in the province. The townsmen of Bānkipur and a host of high-placed Government officials fully appreciated the unselfish work of the lady. The Hon. Mr. Bolton, Commissioner of Patna on the eve of his transfer to Calcutta as Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, visited Mrs. Roy's school and made the following very encouraging remark on leaving, "I am very glad at all that I have seen. In England these things are generally done by maids and widows. It is a new experience to me, Mrs. Roy, that a wife and mother is up to such a heavy task, and can manage it so nicely as you have done." This remark of the Commissioner brought in a substantial help to Mrs. Roy, for, immediately after, the school received a handsome subsidy from the Government.

All this, however, could not satisfy the hankering of that great soul after doing good to humanity. It had definitely broken the narrow bounds of superstition and meanness, and with greater light came greater love, wider charity and a larger capacity for doing good. The world became her home and society her kin. Whenever she heard of a helpless woman uncared for at childbed, she hastened to the spot and worked there as a nurse; whenever she heard of a life in danger, who was there but Mrs. Roy by the side of the passing soul? Summer or winter, day or night, rich or poor, she did not mind her personal inconvenience in responding to duty's call, and to her the day was lost if it was not spent in doing something noble and useful. With frequent repetition her isolated acts of charity developed into a habit; habit grew into nature; and nature became a passion. She yielded to this, her only passion in life. Sometimes she would not even wait for her husband's permission. She followed her ideal passionately, even as a boy follows the rainbow in the sky.

XX

Thus the lady worked ceaselessly for four

years for her school, her family* at home and her family abroad. But the strain was too much for the nerves of a Bengali woman. What with her gigantic task of regenerating the condition of her less favoured sisters in Bihār, what with bereavements now and then, and the pin-pricks of an occasional disappointment inevitable in a struggle between the good in human nature and the bad in society her health was shattered. The work was too heavy ; the struggle was too great. But the work was not yet complete. She started the school with five girls ; on March 31, 1896, the roll showed forty. The funds of the school were more than solvent now, though five years back she did not know where the money was to come from. So, with a sigh of relief she welcomed the proposal of making over the institution to Government and retiring herself from the management. This was easily done ; and she fervently prayed to God Almighty that her pet child might thrive well under the care of its adoptive parent (April, 1896).

But now the voice from another world reached her ears to tell her of the Home of her

* The Boarding Institution was known as "the Aghorekāmini Family" at Bānkipur.

Heavenly Father, and that this darling daughter was wanted no more on this land of strange faces. She had finished her pilgrimage and was wanted before the feet of her Maker. She read the summons and understood the hint. Friends called it "The Rheumatism of the heart," illness, excruciating pain and patient suffering led her by the hand, step by step, through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The shadow had to be crossed before she could enter the garden of eternal enjoyment in the City of Rest.

We glean the following from her diary, dated May 27, 1896. "No longer wanted here. The text of the morning sermon was—Nothing of this world delights me now. I am anxious to be there. I long to be there. Teach me, O Lord, the usages of that country. Tell me, O Father, how I can forget *this* and how I can grow to like *that*."

Her work here was done and she was ready for the voyage Home across this stormy sea of life. After a fortnight's illness, on June 15, 1896, this great woman passed peacefully into the sleep of Death.

—Devi Aghorekāmini left this world at the early age of forty. But she has left behind a name that posterity will not "willingly let die."

May God preserve to us her three worthy sons* who typify some traits of their noble mother's character.

XXI

“Without haste, but without rest” was the guiding motto of her life ; so, Devi Aghorekāmini succeeded in achieving the end she had in view. She did duty for duty's sake, clear of any thought of consequence ; so she succeeded in the face of the taunts and jeers of an unsympathetic world. She firmly believed in an ideal, and that ideal she followed with a singleness of purpose that would do credit to her admiring brothers of the sterner sex. The sweetness of her temper brought on by that religious tone which marked her character so pre-eminently in the latter half of her life was an envy of friends and foes alike. Her end was rather premature, and we wish she could live a few years more of her useful life to inspire her country-men and country-women with her noble example. But that was not to be, and she was called away to work, perhaps, in a different sphere of activity ;

* Mr. Subodh Chandra Roy, Bar-at-Law, Mr. Sādhān Chandra Roy, Mechanical Engineer, and Dr. Bidhān Chandra Roy, an ornament of the Medical Profession ; all of Calcutta.

and we must conclude with what the noble verses teach us about the traits of a noble nature :—

“It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be ;
Or standing like an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald and sere ;
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May,
Although it fall and die that night—
It was the plant and flower of Light.
In small proportions we just beauties see ;
And in short measures life may perfect be.”

FINIS.

